

## **Choosing and Adapting Developmentally Appropriate Songs**

Excerpted from “Developmentally Appropriate Song and Chant Repertoire” workshop  
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Following are some guidelines to help in choosing developmentally appropriate songs:

**LYRICS:** In order to enable children to participate as accurately as is developmentally appropriate:

**Choose** songs and chants with lots of repetition. (“*If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands...*” repeats the same phrases within the verse as well as from verse to verse, with substitutions; “*Old MacDonald*” repeats the same phrases from verse to verse with substitutions. Call-and-response songs and songs where participants echo also are forms of repetition.)

**Avoid** songs and chants that don’t use much repetition. Even if the chorus repeats, young children wouldn’t be expected to join accurately in a sequence of verses that don’t repeat words and phrases predictably.

**TEMPO/RHYTHM:** In order to enable children to participate as accurately as is developmentally appropriate:

**Choose** songs/chants that can be paced slowly AND engagingly for very young children (about 60 beats per minute). In general, older children will keep up with a faster pace. Watch them; if they aren’t imitating accurately once the song/chant is familiar, slow down.

**Avoid** songs/chants that have complex rhythm patterns, such as syncopation, that may be in the way of accurate involvement.

**MELODY:** Try using your classroom xylophone or other tonal instrument to test song melodies. In order to enable children to sing as accurately as is developmentally appropriate:

**Choose** songs with small intervals between notes in the melody. (In the phrase “*Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,*” notice the small melody interval between each word.)

**Avoid** songs with big intervals between notes in the melody. (In “*Somewhere over the rainbow...*” notice the big leap in “*Somewhere.*”)

**Choose** songs in which the melody notes repeat. (In the phrase “*Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,*” notice that the melody notes *within each word* are the same. In “*Rain, rain, go away, come again some other day,*” there is a two-note melody pattern that repeats over and over.)

**Avoid** songs in which the notes in the melody change quickly. (In “*Somewhere over the rainbow...*” notice that every syllable is a different note in “*over the rainbow.*”)

**Choose** songs with a 5-note range as much as possible (Ex. *do-re-mi-fa-sol* or *mi-fa-sol-la-ti*, etc.) (“*Rain, rain*” is: *sol mi, sol-sol mi, sol-sol mi la sol-sol mi*. On your classroom xylophone: G E, G-G E, G-G E A G-G E.)

**Avoid** songs with a wide range between the highest and lowest notes in the song. (In “*Somewhere over the rainbow...*” notice that there is a full octave – eight notes – from the low and high notes in the word “*Somewhere.*”)

### **Examples of Best Song Characteristics for Age/Stage**

Let’s look at some of the songs sung most commonly in the U.S. with young children and analyze them.

#### **0- to 18-Months Song/Chant Characteristics:**

One of baby’s favorites is certainly:

***“Peek-a-boo – I see you!”***

The characteristics of “peek-a-boo” serve as good guidelines for songs and chants for this age/stage:

- It’s very short – the phrases are short, and there are only two of them.
- Vowel sounds are repeated: peek/see, boo/you.
- The same two short lines are repeated over and over as the baby continues to be interested in the game.
- The content of the lyric and the skills required for the associated game are developmentally appropriate.
- We tend to emphasize steady beat in our chanting/singing of the lyric.
- We tend to chant/sing using distinct, dramatic (and possibly consistent) variations in pitch (but we don’t expect the child to duplicate this accurately).

#### **18- to 36- Months Song/Chant Characteristics:**

What are a toddler’s favorite songs?

Often: “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” and “The Wheels on the Bus”

*Head, shoulders, knees and toes,  
knees and toes  
Head, shoulders, knees and toes,  
knees and toes  
Eyes and ears and  
mouth and nose  
Head, shoulders, knees and toes,  
knees and toes*

*The wheels on the bus go  
‘round and ‘round  
‘round and ‘round  
‘round and ‘round  
The wheels on the bus go  
‘round and ‘round  
All through the town*

The characteristics of “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” and “The Wheels on the Bus” serve as good guidelines for songs and chants for this age/stage:

- Songs are longer than before.
- Melodies are simple.
- Words and lines are repeated.
- There is a lot of rhyming.
- Content is of direct interest to toddler in her/his stage of identifying things, and skills in the common games are developmentally appropriate.
- Song may be repeated with substitutions.

### **3- to 5-Year-Olds Song/Chant Characteristics:**

Songs most often cited for this age group are “Twinkle, Twinkle,” “ABC,” “Old MacDonald,” and “Jingle Bells.” What are characteristics of these songs?

*Twinkle, twinkle little star  
How I wonder what you are  
Up above the world so high  
Like a diamond in the sky  
Twinkle, twinkle little star  
How I wonder what you are.*

*ABCD  
EFG  
HIJK  
LMNOP  
QRS  
TUV  
WX  
Y and Z*

*Now I know my ABCs  
Next time won't you sing with me?*

*Old MacDonald had a farm –  
ee-I-ee-I-Oh  
And on this farm he had a (name animal) –  
ee-I-ee-I-Oh  
With a (animal sound – animal sound) here  
And a (animal sound – animal sound) there  
Here a (animal sound)  
There a (animal sound)  
Everywhere a (animal sound – animal sound)  
Old McDonald has a farm –  
ee-I-ee-I-Oh  
(Repeat, substituting different animals.)*

The characteristics of “Twinkle, Twinkle,” “ABC,” and “Old MacDonald” serve as good guidelines for songs and chants for this age/stage:

- Songs may be longer (10-12 lines)
- Melodies may be less simple and somewhat less repetitive – though repetition is still desirable.
- Repetition of phrases, although fewer repetitions are workable.
- Repetition of sounds (rhyming, alliterations, imitation of sounds)
- Content is related to what preschoolers are learning – names of letters, names of animals, and other things about their environment.