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## Sensory Integration through Nursery Rhymes and Song

— Joani Lackie-Callighan

Facilitating the healthy integration of children's sensory systems is a high priority for any early childhood teacher. Using the vehicle of nursery rhymes and song, teachers can target Rudolph Steiner's lower four senses of touch, life, self-movement and balance by weaving among the three dimensional planes of the body, adding a variety of limb gestures and utilizing dramatic play.

In mainstream vocabulary, the movement sense correlates with the body's proprioceptive system, through which information received by the contracting and stretching of muscles and the compression of joints gives information about body position and body geography. The sense of balance is also known as the vestibular system. The sensory organs for balance are the semicircular canals and cochlea located in the inner ear. Touch or the tactile sense through Steiner's lens becomes an avenue to learn about physical boundaries between oneself and the world, not just about textures and temperatures. The life sense provides an awareness of general well-being and comfort in the body.

I awakened to the importance of nursery rhymes for language development and phonemic awareness through a workshop presented by Suzanne Down of Juniper Tree Puppetry in Colorado. Further research led me to Jessica Griffen's *Intellidance* in Alberta, Canada, and her use of rhymes with movement. These led me to want to develop some movement games and activities of my own.

An approach that works well in pairing movement with nursery rhymes includes working with the three planes of the body and their midlines, using a variety of lateral arm and leg movements, and focusing on each specific sense of touch, movement and balance.

### Guidelines about the Body's Three Midlines

The *horizontal midline* separates the top half of the body from the lower half of the body at the waist. Movement that encourages the head to be placed below the waist, either from a sitting or standing position, works with this midline. A standing position is used most often.

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The *vertical midline* separates the left side of the body from the right. Integrating movement for this midline encourages arms and legs to crisscross in front of or behind the body.

The *sagittal midline* separates the front of the body from the back. Helpful movement with this midline brings a child forward and backward.

## **Familiar Rhymes and Movements for Working with the Body's Three Planes**

We want to engage each of the senses of touch, balance, and self-movement.

To engage *touch*, the children can tap, poke, brush, squeeze, tickle, or pound their bodies or floor. Touch can be administered from light to heavy or from continuous to intermittent.

To engage *balance* children can shift weight from side to side; spin the entire body; rotate the head around while sitting, standing or kneeling; or change direction or tempo of activity.

To engage *self-movement* or the proprioceptive system, use movement that contracts or expands the body. Work with polarities, such as up/down, left/right, small/tall, stop/go, etc.

Because nursery rhymes are short, you can fit them into your day whenever necessary.

## **Row, Row, Row Your Boat**

*Traditional Song*

*This is a fun social song where everyone sits in a huge circle, spaced comfortably for sitting cross-legged. Begin with legs extended in front of body.*

**Row, row, row your boat  
Gently down the stream.  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily  
Life is but a dream.**

*(pretend to have oars in hand leaning forwards and then pulling back, leaning backwards, repeat till end of stanza)*

**Rock, rock, rock your boat,  
Gently to and fro.  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily  
Over the side you go!**

*(sit cross legged, hands on knees, and rock side to side switching weight from one hip to the other)*

*(tuck chin and rock backwards with spine along floor)*

**Swim, swim, swim about,  
Gently down the stream.  
And if you see a crocodile,  
Don't forget to scream!**

*(lying on your back, do the backstroke moving arms in a circular backward motion, while kicking legs)*

*(on the word scream . . . sit back up and scream)*

Arm and leg actions can include:

Symmetrical movement where hands, arms or legs are doing the exact same thing at the same time. For example, both hands up, both legs jumping, both hands tapping on thighs, etc.

Bilateral movement using both sides of the body in a coordinated way. For example, using “scissor arms,” tapping or chopping right hand on to the left arm, etc.

Reciprocal or alternating movement of hands or legs, exemplified by rocking or swaying from one side of the body to the other, lifting one foot off the ground while planting the other, or switching arm positions.

Cross-lateral movement, crossing any of the three midlines, for example, leaning forwards and backwards, swaying to left then right, crossing arms and legs in front or behind one another.

## ***Jack in the Box***

*Author unknown*

**Jack in the box in his own little house,  
Curled up asleep as quiet as a mouse.**

**Knock on the door and give a little bump,  
Wake Jack up, and up Jack jumps!**

*(children begin curled up on the floor on their knees as small as they can be, while I go around and gently rub everyone’s back)  
(gently tap on top of heads, then with fist, pound on floor)  
(Everyone pops up and jumps up and down.)*

Working with these lower senses builds a strong foundation for academic learning in the future. These senses do not develop without help through the auditory and visual systems, too. Each gesture, action and word builds connections in the brain.

But most importantly, nurturing the lower four senses helps to transform and develop the companion higher four senses of ego, thought, language/word, and hearing, which emerge later in life. So when viewing your work with children through that lens, sensory integration is a gift given for the hope of the future, one child at a time. ♦

**Joani Lackie-Callighan** *has been an early childhood educator for more than twenty-five years, bridging Waldorf-inspired methods into mainstream education classrooms. In the spring of 2016, she presented a workshop on Nursery Rhymes in Movement and Story Boxes at the Michigan Association for the Education of Young Child annual conference.*

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### Resources:

- Ayres, A. Jean, *Sensory Integration and the Child* (Torrance: Western Psychological Services, 2005).
- Down, Susan, *Juniper Tree School of Puppetry Arts*, visit [www.junipertreepuppets.com](http://www.junipertreepuppets.com).
- Griffen, Jessica, *Intellidance*®, visit [www.intellidance.ca](http://www.intellidance.ca).
- Kranowitz, Carol, *The Out-of-Sync Child* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2006).
- Shimer, Joann Carr and Valeris Baadh Garret, *Games Children Sing and Play: Singing Movement Games to Play with Children Ages 3-5* (UK: Hawthorn Press, 2013).