

## RHYMES AND LULLABIES

A nursery rhyme is a traditional song or poem taught to young children, originally in the nursery<sup>1</sup>. Nursery rhymes are generally passed down by oral tradition from one generation to the next as they help children to develop vocabulary and introduce them to enjoy music. In this way they provide children with the opportunity to develop their memory and auditory<sup>2</sup> skills. Besides, they encourage early sound and word recognition – important first steps for reading. Their fanciful<sup>3</sup> stories and colourful characters help children to expand their imagination and may act as an enchanting introduction to the world of literature. They also help children to develop an understanding of humour, and since many rhymes also include mathematical concepts, like counting, time height, measurement, position, volume etc., they can also be used as opportunities to develop vocabulary relating to these concepts. In addition, fingerplay rhymes and clapping songs may help children to develop motor skills and coordination. English nursery rhymes have an old tradition and most of them originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The most famous collection of nursery rhymes in English is that of *Mother Goose*, a name still applied in the United States as a generic title for nursery rhyme collections.

Among the most popular nursery rhymes are *Humpty Dumpty*, *Ring-A-Ring O' Roses*, *Little Jack Horner*, *Rub-A-Dub-Dub* and *Little Miss Muffet*. Most of them have their origins in English history.

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,  
All the King's horses,*



### GLOSSARY

- 1 a place where young children are taken care of
- 2 relating to the ability to hear
- 3 full of unusual and imagined facts



*And all the King's men,  
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

'Humpty Dumpty' was a colloquial term used in the 15<sup>th</sup> century England to describe someone who was very fat. The Humpty Dumpty of the famous rhyme, however, was believed to be a large cannon used during the English Civil War (1642-1649), during the siege<sup>4</sup> of Colchester. In 1648 Colchester was a walled town with a castle and several churches and was protected by the city wall. Standing immediately adjacent to the city wall, was St Mary's Church. A huge cannon, colloquially called Humpty Dumpty, was strategically placed on the wall next to the church. A shot from a Parliamentary cannon damaged the wall beneath Humpty Dumpty, and the cannon tumbled<sup>5</sup> to the ground. The king's men attempted to raise Humpty Dumpty on to another part of the wall. However, because the cannon was so heavy, 'all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again'.

A lullaby or cradle song is a calming song, usually sung to children before they go to sleep. Lullabies originated in England in the late 1300s. One of the most popular English language lullabies is *Rock-a-Bye-Baby*:

*Rock-a-bye baby on the tree top,  
When the wind blows the cradle will rock,  
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall,  
And down will come baby, cradle and all.*

The author of this lullaby is unknown. According to the *Great American Baby Almanac*, it was written by a pilgrim on the Mayflower and was inspired by a habit of the Wampanoag native people, who suspend their cradleboards<sup>6</sup> in trees during fine weather.



**GLOSSARY**

**4** a military operation in which enemy forces surround a town, compelling those inside to surrender

**5** fell

**6** boards or frames on which infants are secured, used by certain Native American peoples as portable cradles

**READING COMPREHENSION**

● Answer the following questions.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ① What is the difference between a nursery rhyme and a lullaby?      | ④ What kind of nursery rhymes help children to develop motor skills? |
| ② What are the main functions of nursery rhymes?                     | ⑤ What is 'Mother Goose'?  |
| ③ To what extent can nursery rhymes stimulate a child's imagination? | ⑥ What is the 'Humpty Dumpty' nursery rhyme about?                   |

**ACTIVITIES**



**VOCABULARY**

● Explain in your own words the meaning of the following terms.

- |              |       |              |       |
|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|
| ① Memory     | ..... | ⑤ Collection | ..... |
| ② Characters | ..... | ⑥ Cannon     | ..... |
| ③ Enchanting | ..... | ⑦ Huge       | ..... |
| ④ Fingerplay | ..... | ⑧ Cradle     | ..... |

**WRITING**

● Write sentences which have the same meaning as the following.

- ① Nursery rhymes are generally passed down by oral tradition from one generation to the next.  
.....
- ② They provide children with the opportunity to develop their memory and auditory skills.  
.....
- ③ Besides, they encourage early sound and word recognition – important steps for reading.  
.....
- ④ English nursery rhymes have an old tradition and most of them originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.  
.....

## READING AND SPEAKING

- Read the following nursery rhymes. In a dictionary, find out the meaning of the words you don't know. Then, explain in your own words the meaning of the rhymes.



- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>① Little Miss Muffet<br/>Sat on a tuffet,<br/>Eating her curds and whey;<br/>There came a big spider,<br/>Who sat down beside her<br/>And frightened Miss Muffet away.</p> | <p>② Hush-a-bye<br/>Don't you cry<br/>Go to sleep my little baby<br/>When you wake,<br/>You'll have cake,<br/>And all the pretty little horses.</p> |
|---|---|

## TEXT COMPLETION

- Here is another famous nursery rhyme, Ring around the Rosy. Fill in the gaps, translating the words in brackets into English.

### RING AROUND THE ROSY

*Ring around the rosy  
A pocketful of posies  
'Ashes, ashes'  
We all fall down!*

The words to the *Ring around the Rosy* children's ring game have their origin in English history. The historical period dates ..... ① (*risale*) to the Great Plague of London in 1665 (bubonic plague). The ..... ② (*sintomi*) of the plague included a rosy red rash in the ..... ② (*forma*) of a ring on the ..... ③ (*pelle*) – 'ring around the rosy'. ..... ④ (*tasche*) were filled with sweet smelling herbs since people believed that the ..... ⑤ (*malattia*) was transmitted by bad smells. The term 'ashes ashes' refers to the cremation of the dead bodies. The English version of the rhyme replaces 'ashes' with 'a-tishoo, a-tishoo' as violent ..... ⑥ (*starnutire*) was another symptom of the disease.