

Rhyme Time: Why Spotting Rhyming Words Builds Early Reading Skills

Before children start blending letter sounds in phonics, they build a quieter skill called phonological awareness – the ability to hear and play with the sounds in words. Noticing that 'cat' and 'hat' rhyme is one of the simplest and most enjoyable ways children develop this. This guide explains what rhyme awareness is, why it matters for reading, and how you can nurture it gently through nursery rhymes, songs and picture books, both at home and in the Reception classroom.

What rhyme awareness actually is

Phonological awareness means being able to hear and notice the sounds that make up spoken words, separately from their meaning or spelling. Rhyme is one of the easiest parts of this to spot: when a child notices that 'cat' and 'hat' end with the same sound, they are tuning in to how words are built from smaller sound parts. This is different from phonics, where children learn which letters represent which sounds and blend them together to read words. Rhyme awareness usually comes first, as a playful, listening-based skill, and gives children a feel for sound patterns that makes phonics easier to grasp later. In England's early years, this sits within two areas of the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) framework, the official guidance for how young children learn and develop: Communication and Language, and Literacy.

What this looks like in Reception

In Reception (the first year of primary school in England, for children aged four to five), practitioners build rhyme awareness through everyday, enjoyable activities rather than formal lessons. This might include singing nursery rhymes together, reading picture books with rhyming text aloud, playing games where children spot or suggest a rhyming word, and simply having fun with silly made-up rhymes. These activities sit alongside, and lead into, the systematic phonics teaching most schools use to teach reading. Exactly how and how often rhyme activities are woven into the day varies from school to school and setting to setting, so if you would like to know more about what your child's class is doing, it is always worth asking their teacher directly.

What it means for your child

If your child enjoys nursery rhymes, makes up silly rhyming words, or giggles at rhyming jokes, they are already practising a skill that supports later reading. There is no need to worry if your child doesn't yet spot rhymes easily, or finds it tricky – children develop this at different paces, and it usually comes with exposure and enjoyment rather than practice drills. Rhyme awareness is just one small piece of the much bigger picture of learning to read, alongside phonics, vocabulary and a love of stories. It is not something children are tested on formally, and it is not a sign of future reading difficulty if it takes a while to click. The calm, playful approach that works best for phonics generally works best here too.

How you can help at home

You don't need any special resources or teaching knowledge – just everyday moments of play. Sing familiar nursery rhymes together, pausing before the last word of a line to see if your child wants to fill it in ('Jack and Jill went up the...'). Read picture books with rhyming text and let your child join in

with the repeated or rhyming parts. Try silly games in the car or bath, such as seeing how many words you can both think of that rhyme with a simple word like 'dog' or 'sun' – nonsense words are fine and often the most fun. Keep it light, short and led by your child's interest; a couple of minutes here and there, woven into bedtime stories or songs, is far more valuable than any sense of pressure or 'getting it right'.

Questions parents often ask

My child doesn't seem interested in rhymes – should I worry? Not at all; interest grows with exposure, so keep offering rhymes in a relaxed way and it will likely develop over time. Is rhyme part of the phonics screening check? No – that check, used nationally in England, focuses on letter sounds and blending, not rhyme. Does this apply if English isn't my child's first language? Rhyme games work well for children learning English too, and can be just as enjoyable in a home language as in English. My child has SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) – will this still help? Many children benefit from rhyme play, but support needs vary, so it's worth speaking to your child's teacher or SENCO (special educational needs coordinator) about what suits your child best.

Sources

- Department for Education (DfE) – 'Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage' (GOV.UK)
- Department for Education (DfE) – 'Development Matters: non-statutory curriculum guidance for the early years foundation stage' (GOV.UK)