



A FROEBELIAN APPROACH

songs, rhymes and finger plays

by Jane Dyke



This pamphlet has been produced by the Froebel Trust as part of a series focussing on various themes closely associated with Froebelian practice today. The pamphlets are an accessible resource for those supporting children birth to eight.

Songs, rhymes and finger plays -exploring Froebel's *Mother-Play and Nursery Songs*

What is your earliest musical memory?

Children and adults are naturally drawn to music and musicality - they are important aspects of our human lives. This pamphlet introduces you to Froebel's 'mother songs', what Froebel was teaching us and how relevant that is today in our Early Childhood environments.

Musicality is within us and helps us to produce music, it is natural and spontaneous (Horning 2012). Songs can be soothing, comforting, motivating, exciting... Songs can be used as a cultural tool, bringing people together, conveying values, giving courage.



Fig. 1: Froebel 1844 / 1878

Were you aware that many finger plays, action songs and ring games as we know them today have their origins in Froebel's *Mother-Play and Nursery Songs*?

(Froebel 1878, first published 1844).

Froebel's last published work was a series of some 50 finger plays (which today we generally refer to as finger rhymes), action songs and games for mothers and other family members to share with young children at home. Each song was intricately illustrated to depict everyday life and included illustrations of finger and hand movements to accompany the rhymes/songs.



The value of strong relationships

The illustrations helped to develop connections to real life and respect for others regardless of their status in life. For example, the illustrations for 'Pat-a-cake' showed links between the corn growing, the miller, the flour, the baker and eventually the cake being eaten by the child.

Although these ideas were beyond the understanding of infants, Froebel believed that they were concepts that could be developed and built on over time.



Fig. 2: 'Pat-a-cake'

Froebel recognised the importance of key relationships in a child's life from babyhood - within the home, mothers, and indeed all family members, were central in a child's life. He believed that singing would help family members develop warm, close, affectionate and intimate relationships with young children. The period of infancy, with mothers and babies learning together, had central importance in Froebel's educational approach.

Music and songs are important in their own right but can also be useful tools in developing relationships.

Today many young babies spend time in early childhood settings. As practitioners, it is important that we develop warm and affectionate relationships with babies.

In a Froebelian setting, practitioners are aware that strong relationships are important and can be enhanced and strengthened through music and singing. Babies will fix on faces and a loving voice; care routines can become times when significant relationships can be developed with song.

Changing a nappy can be enhanced by making up lyrics to simple cheerful songs, such as 'Here we go round the mulberry bush' – 'Now is the time to

Fig.3: Ophelia and her Mum sharing 'Round and round the garden' after her nappy change, enjoying eye contact, joy and connectivity.



change your nappy, change your nappy, change your nappy. Now is the time to change your nappy on a cold and frosty morning'. Continuing through the experience - 'This is the way we kick our legs' - gently moving the child's limbs in time with the beat and 'This is the way we stand up tall, stand up tall, stand up tall ...' as the routine comes to an end.



Music can help practitioners to be 'in tune' with children which will, in turn, build strong and healthy relationships.

.....

Many contemporary perspectives chime with Froebel's approach.

Professor Colwyn Trevarthen (1997) helps us to understand how musicality starts with babies' relationships with the people who matter to them. He also suggests that babies and adults are naturally inclined to speak and coo at each other in rhymes and melodies and that this interaction shapes babies' emotional and cognitive growth.

In the Froebel Trust's Baby Room Project (2013-15), Sacha Powell, Kathy Gooch and Louie Werth found that:

- Singing promotes intimacy and connectedness
- Singing has educational benefits
- Singing connects families, babies and practitioners
- Singing supports practitioner well-being



Fig. 4



The value of content

Froebel believed that adults and children learn together and enhance each other's lives through music and everyday activities. Singing can help you to be 'in tune' with children, which in turn will build strong and healthy relationships. Activities, such as bottle-feeding, provide opportunities for quiet, bonding experiences; soft lullabies or gentle humming can soothe and encourage closeness with a baby. (Fig.6) In a busy baby room, quiet mindful 'lulling' can have positive benefits for both the child and practitioner:

Singing with a baby on your lap is a reciprocal, responsive activity (Tovey 2013). The baby's cues – such as eye contact, vocalisations, smiles or wiggles – show their interests and preferences and invite a response.

Humans use musical forms in their speech – changes in pitch, rhythm, volume and speed – and babies imitate these sounds, making the adult and child like dance partners. Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) call this 'communicative musicality' in which the partners create an emotional connection. So these early musical communications strengthen bonds between practitioner and child.



Fig. 5: Playing the piano



Fig. 6: Quiet bonding moments

Froebel emphasised that the content of songs and rhymes was of importance and that they should always be educational. Children enjoy 'nonsense' and traditional rhymes, such as 'Ring a ring of roses' or 'Pop goes the weasel', but we must always also be aware of where a child is in their development and learning. For very young children who are developing their sense of the world we should be careful to sing about what the children know and are experiencing.



Representing the child's world: songs and culture

A Froebelian approach is an integrated approach for making sense of the child's world. Froebel's 'Mother Songs' introduced everyday experiences of a child living in rural Germany in the 1840s. Although children have some of the same experiences today – for example, 'Pat a cake' works just as well today as it did nearly 200 years ago - much has changed. So it is helpful to introduce songs which have relevance for a child's sense of self, celebrate their community and roles within it, and explore nature and the world. This was Froebel's intention..

At the same time, songs are a powerful way of introducing children to different cultures. They provide powerful ways of engaging with, understanding and participating in cultural and religious events.

Powell, Gooch and Werth (2015) talk about singing being a universal human activity that crosses and shapes cultures. They highlight the need to take time to tune into babies to truly 'interact' with them, learning about their interests, home culture and their response to song.

Nicola Burke encourages practitioners to 'use songs and rhymes from all cultures and find out what songs, rhymes and music babies hear at home' (Burke 2018:7).

'Today the most urgent need in education is that the school should be united with the life of home and family'
(Froebel in Lilley 1967: 156)

Chinese New Year can be enriched through music and dance; inviting Chinese families to join in and share songs and music will further develop relationships and community. Learning about Diwali and Christmas through songs can lead onto creating drama and story.

Froebelian settings 'link' with the baby's family, building reciprocal relationships, finding out about the family culture and introducing special songs that they can share together. The videos in the Southwark 'Family Lives' project illustrate these key principles with examples such as 'Wheels on the bus', 'Ghanaian song' and 'Ainsi font font font': <https://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/early-years-development/singing-with-your-baby/>



Fig. 7: Jack choosing his music at home



The value of music and movement

‘By regular, rhythmic movements – and this is of special importance – she [the parent/carer/practitioner] brings this life within the child’s conscious control when she dandles him up and down on her hand or arm in rhythmic movements and to rhythmic sounds’
(Froebel 1898:70).

Froebel believed that music and movement lead the child to feel their own inner life and, in Froebel’s world, everything ‘links’ and is ‘connected’. In his book, *The Education of Man*, Froebel describes the importance of the mother’s physical play with the young child, saying: ‘All this tends to lead the child to self-consciousness, to reflection about himself’ (Froebel 1898: 66)

Froebel explains how ‘maternal instinct and love gradually introduce the child to his little outside world, proceeding from the whole to the part, from the near to the remote’ (ibid) – so the ‘mother songs’ start with the child and then go out beyond the home, to the community.

Movement, rhythm, rhyme and learning are powerfully connected (Tovey 2013). Infants are not just being entertained when you sing to them but are actively involved when you move their limbs.

Froebel’s ‘mother songs’ and ring games focused on developing individual and whole body parts, starting with the hands, fingers and body movements, followed by coordinating movement and moving onto symbolic representation, where the fingers might symbolize a climbing spider.

Froebel’s songs and rhymes follow a physical progression.

Yellow Dot, a group of nurseries in Hampshire, drew on the stages of finger rhymes developed by Tina Bruce and Jenny Spratt (2011):

Stage 1

Lullabies

Stage 2

Rhymes/Songs that use the whole hand

Stage 3

Rhymes/Songs that use the fingers

Stage 4

Crossing the mid line (songs that encourage hand movement extending across the body)

Stage 5

Rhymes/songs that use the whole body

Stage 6

Rhymes/songs that use the whole body and introduce games / movement



Lullabies

The key person is of great importance for babies and very young children and lullabies help you to nurture attachments.

Songs/Rhymes that use the whole hand

At around 3 months, babies' hands start to open out purposefully and they begin to grasp and release objects, so put rattles and other objects into their hands. Children - including babies - can understand things before they can perform them, so it is very important that we help them to develop their understanding as they see, hear and move. It is our role to articulate their world or, as Froebel put it, 'add the explanatory words' (Froebel 1891:81).

Singing rhymes with simple actions helps young children to make sense of their world and develop their gross and fine motor control. To begin with, using the whole hand is easier than individual fingers.

For example, 'Open, shut them, Open, shut them. Give a little clap! Open, shut them, Open, shut them. Put them in your lap'.

'I have ten little fingers, they all belong to me, I can make them do things, would you like to see?' is a transition into further action songs.

As we sing '*Round and round the garden*' we are encouraging the baby to look, listen and respond, to build a sense of anticipation and to experience laughter, as well as poetic and dramatic forms of speech. Babies learn quickly about the patterns of language and that conversations involve a 'to and fro' with pauses and responses between the partners, using words and 'body language'.



Fig. 8: '*Round and round the garden*'



Fig. 9

'The students [practitioners] have to be specially trained in children's songs, little songs to elevate the heart and open the mind' (Froebel 1887: 253)



.....

Rhymes and songs like 'Rock-a-bye baby' and 'This little piggy went to market' also introduce young children to anticipation and 'risk' and 'uncertainty' in what Tovey calls safe and pleasurable ways (Tovey 2013).

Spoken rhymes with the whole hand, tickling songs and bouncy songs give opportunities for eye contact, touch and physical closeness, that build a sense of security, close bonds and encourage early communication skills.

Songs/Rhymes that use the fingers

As hands develop, grasping and releasing, holding and pointing, children develop the capacity to make movements such as pincer grips. Finger songs help to strengthen fingers and because fingers are representing something else, they develop children's awareness of symbols. In Froebelian practice this is called 'symbolic representation' and is an important development:



Fig. 10: Strength and dexterity



Fig. 11: 'Tommy thumb'

'Tommy thumb': Tommy and his four friends represent characters. Introducing rhymes which represent body parts supports the child's concept of himself.

'Two little dicky birds': Use fingers to represent birds.



.....

An appropriate next step would be introducing rhymes about nature, food, community and so on: 'Here is the beehive, Where are all the bees?'— here, the hands represent the hive and the fingers the bees.

These all form an important part of the journey towards literacy, coordinating sight, sound and movement and contributing towards future reading and writing.
(Bruce and Spratt 2011)

Observe as you sing and note the children's deep concentration as they focus on hand/eye coordination. Sing slowly and look at your hands as you sing to encourage the children to do the same. Jenny Spratt (2011) suggests that this kind of 'tracking' is important for later reading.

Songs/Rhymes that cross the midline

When a child is physically ready and comfortable to do so, sitting on the floor is important so that they feel grounded. It helps children focus on the detail and actions, so it is important that you take the lead and sing slowly and clearly to help children engage and get into position. Remember to include a lot of repetition so that everyone has enough time to develop and consolidate the words and actions.

In stage 2, using fingers and naming them introduces 'symbolic representation', tracking our fingers with our gaze. Stage 3 links gross motor with the fine motor and encourages the children to 'cross the midline', extending their arms across their bodies. The gaze is also extended further as the eye is looking at the hand from further away.

Stories and characterisation develop as you engage in drama and pantomime with children - so 'Tommy thumb' appears from behind your back and dances across with extended arms.

'Two fat gentlemen met in the lane'— can walk side by side from left to right with extended arms or up and over a hill!



Fig. 12: Extending arms and gaze

As you 'Wind the bobbin up', you encourage the children to stretch across their body, tracking their finger with their gaze. Songs using the 'midline' help to further ground the children and develop tracking and focus, developing both gross and fine motor skills and the left and right side of the brain.





Fig. 13: Action song, 'Heads, shoulders, knees and toes'

'Action songs encourage creativity, memory, sensitivity to others, coordinated movement, communication, an increased vocabulary, language development, music, dance and drama, as well as sequencing, predicting and an awareness of detail and anticipation' (Bruce and Spratt 2011, 101)



Fig. 14: Action song, 'Donkey riding'

Singing and finger rhymes are a valuable way to introduce children to symbolic representation, making symbols and using them as they learn to walk, talk and pretend.



.....

'The children learn these songs incredibly fast, especially if you sing them very clearly and slowly altogether in chorus. Even if the little ones do not outwardly seem to join in, they are thinking it all to themselves...'
(Froebel 1887: 85)

Songs/Rhymes that use the whole body

As they grow older, action songs develop the whole body. The lower body naturally develops slower than the upper so start with the children initially sitting down. Once the song is learnt, moving to standing will be more successful. Songs such as 'Row row row your boat' will look and feel very different for a young toddler sitting on the floor than a 4-year-old. The development of the child will differentiate the movements.

Moving while we sing is important as it develops a sense of rhythm and beat. A steady beat plays a hugely important role in the development of our speech, movement, thoughts and verbal organisation. Our brains are predisposed to like patterns, and action songs are full of sound patterns and rhymes. As we raise our arms whilst singing 'Roly poly, roly poly up, up, up' powerful messages are sent to our brains. 'Roly poly' has pattern and rhyme and this distinguishing between the R and the P will help children to distinguish letter and sound awareness (phonemic awareness) - very important for learning to read. (Bruce and Spratt 2011)



Fig. 15: Moving with the song

'The freer and more spontaneous the arrangement, the more excellent is the effect of the game'
(Froebel 1887: 85)



Songs/Rhymes that use the whole body and introduce games/movement

Action songs can be differentiated by outcome for younger and older children, so that they can join together to learn from each other. 'Here we go round the mulberry bush' can be sung in pairs, small groups or larger groups as an introduction to walking around in a circle, then standing still and using upper body parts. Introducing the 'Hokey cokey', 'Here we go Looby Loo' and 'In and out the dusty bluebells' involves children in coordinating their bodies in relation to others, partaking in rules and creating their own rules.

Music is a physical experience and songs with movement are important because they give the child a 'whole body' experience of music. They aid the development of physical coordination, mental concentration, develop fine and gross motor skills, help a child's sequential memory and also help them feel part of a group. Songs that use the whole body allow the children to express themselves and have great fun.



Fig. 16: Moving while singing develops a sense of rhythm



Figs. 17 & 18: Counting and ordering numbers 1-5, story and drama, ensuring songs have a strong rhythm and steady beat are all to be encouraged.



The value of singing and rhyme



Fig. 19: A practitioner has made an autumn basket to promote songs and rhymes, linking with the season and the children's interest in garden animals.

Not only does singing create joyfulness, a sense of community and develops communication, language and literacy, it can be an important way to facilitate everyday routines. A singing voice is more likely to attract the children's attention and it can be a useful tool to signal transition times in the day.

A Froebelian approach emphasises and encourages spontaneous singing and rhymes. Traditional songs such as 'Here we go round the mulberry bush' can be used for lots of adaptations - 'This is the way we pick up blocks/books' / stack our chairs / drink our milk...'

Linking songs and rhymes to nursery life and the seasons can help to promote singing. Creating a themed seasonal basket, which can be explored in different ways with cue cards, can enhance practice by supporting practitioners. Nicola Burke (2018) suggests providing song boxes filled with interesting items to spark children's imaginative song ideas and create an enabling environment for musicality.



Fig. 20: Make sure you show children that you are genuinely interested in what they are doing and model musical behaviour with them.



Beyond Froebel's 'mother songs'

.....

Marjorie Ouvry (2012) challenges us to think that learning new songs is as important as topping up the sand tray. She urges that we have little excuse as there is general access to the internet these days and every song book comes with a cd or download. Providing resources to support your team is important in helping them become well-informed, creative educators.

Susan Young (2003) suggests that singing should be encouraged one to one as well as in small and larger groups. You need to be able to tune into individual children and encourage and enhance their improvisation, just as one would with mark making skills.

In summary:

Today, nursery rhymes ...

- are a great way to learn early phonic skills (the ability to hear, identify and manipulate letter sounds)
- give children practice in pitch and volume as well as in language rhythm
- expand a child's imagination
- follow a clear sequence of events
- are easy to repeat, so they become some of a child's first sentences
- improve a child's vocabulary
- are an early form of poetry
- contain sophisticated literary devices
- are fun!



A few practical tips

- Making sets of song cards can help you to have a larger and more varied repertoire of songs and rhymes
- Being prepared and organised makes a big difference in a busy nursery and time taken to organise resources well is a good investment for the future
- A Froebelian setting encourages children to think about Life, Knowledge and Beauty so the songs we introduce to the children should be within the experience of their 'Life' and true to life (so introducing real frogs for example), have educational 'Knowledge' which is worth learning and have an element of 'Beauty'
- Well produced and organized resources promote that element of beauty and encourage children to look after and respect them
- A Froebelian approach emphasises 'freedom with guidance' and independence. Using song cards enables even very young children to choose the songs that they would like to sing



5 little ducks

5 little ducks went swimming one day
Over the hill and far away
Mamma duck said:
"Quack, quack, quack, quack."
And only 4 little ducks came back

(repeat for 4,3,2,1)

Row, row, row your boat

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

Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream
If you see a crocodile
Don't forget to scream
Aaaaah!



Fig. 21: Life, Knowledge and Beauty



-
- Areas to allow children to be spontaneous in their music-making are important, enhanced by skilful practitioners to develop musicality (Fig 25)
 - Developing relationships with home is a shared responsibility and we can enhance this by sharing words to songs we sing in nursery - have a sing along at the beginning or end of day - make bags of songs and simple instruments for families to enjoy at home (Fig 26)
 - A Froebelian approach provides children with first-hand experiences - ask parents to come and share their cultural songs and instruments they may play - take the children to hear local musicians in the community or invite them in to play in your nursery. (Fig 27)



Fig. 25



Fig. 27



Fig. 26



References

Bruce, T. (2015) *Early Childhood Education* 5th ed. London: Hodder Education

Bruce, T. and Spratt, J. (2011) *Essentials of Literacy from 0-7*, 2nd ed. London: Sage

Burke, N. (2018) *Musical Development Matters in the Early Years*. London: BAECE

Family Lives (2019) *Singing With Your Baby*. A project funded by the Froebel Trust. Available at: <https://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/early-years-development/singing-with-your-baby/introduction-to-singing-with-your-baby/>

Froebel, F. (1878, first published 1844) *Mother-Play, and Nursery Songs: With Notes to Mothers*. Boston: Lee and Shepard

Froebel, F. (1887) *Froebel's Letters on the Kindergarten*. London: Swan Sonnenschein.

Froebel, F. (1898, first published 1826) *The Education of Man*. New York, London: Appleton

Lilley, I. (1967) *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from his Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Malloch S. and Trevarthen, C. (eds) (2009) *Communicative Musicality: Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Ouvry, M. (2012) 'Froebel's Mother Songs today'. In Bruce, T. (ed) *Early Childhood Practice: Froebel Today*. London: Sage

Powell, S., Goouch, K., and Werth, L. (2015) *Mothers' Songs in Daycare for Babies*. Report on Pilot Project for The Froebel Trust. London: The Froebel Trust. Available at: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/research-library-old/mothers-songs-in-daycare-for-babies/>

Spratt, J. (2012) 'The importance of hand and finger rhymes'. In Bruce, T. (ed) *Early Childhood Practice: Froebel Today*. London: Sage

Tovey, H. (2013) *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice*. London: David Fulton

Trevarthen, C. (1997) 'Preface'. In Pavlecevic, M. *Music Therapy in Context: Music, Meaning and Relationship*. London: Jessica Kingsley

Young, S. (2003) *Music with the Under Fours*. London: Routledge

Further reading

Baker, M. (2012) 'Family songs in the Froebelian tradition'. In Bruce, T. (ed) *Early Childhood Practice: Froebel Today*. London: Sage

Koutsoupidou, T. (2015) *Musical Play in Early Years Education: Towards a Model of Autonomy through Adult Support*.

Available at <https://www.froebel.org.uk/research-library-old/musical-play-in-early-years-education/>

Werth, L. (2018) 'Froebel's contributions to early childhood pedagogy'. In Bruce, T., Elfer, P., Powell, S. and Werth, L. *The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice*. London: Routledge



Photo credits

With thanks to:

Ellesmere Children's Centre

Mia and Ophelia Wright

Rachel Sanders

Winchester Community Players

Yellow Dot Nursery Group

The author

Jane Dyke was the founder of the Yellow Dot Nursery Group.

She was part of the Froebel Trust Travelling Tutor Pilot Scheme and currently works with the Travelling Tutors.

Although retired from Yellow Dot, Jane is a member of the Froebel Trust and writes and talks on Froebelian practice.



Clarence Lodge, Clarence Lane, Roehampton, London SW15 5JW
Registered Charity No.1145128
www.froebeltrust.org.uk