Why encourage parents to share rhymes with their children? For many, poetry or rhymes are not a natural choice for parents or librarians when selecting books to read aloud. But the benefits for children are many. Poetry can be a stepping stone towards learning to read. Poetry and rhymes build a child's vocabulary as they include words that we do not use in everyday conversations. Also, poetry read aloud to children teaches them to listen, a skill necessary for learning. They are frequently exposed to words that rhyme, reinforcing word sounds and rhythm. Development of oral language is achieved as they begin to repeat the phrases that they have heard many times. Children who have heard and spoken rhymes are able to make up their own rhymes, a skill necessary for learning to read.
Interspersing poems and fingerplays with children’s books can get children actively involved in a library storytime and helps the storyteller’s transitioning between stories. When preparing themed fingerplay sheets for storytimes, we occasionally cannot find enough rhymes with actions. Then we will search for short poems. Propping, or including materials from, the poem creates a stimulus to help children remember the words. With “Pitter Patter” and “Slip on Your Raincoat,” we would use raincoats or umbrellas. If it isn’t feasible to carry in all the actual props, then we could create felt pieces to use on a flannelboard.

Rhymes such as “Ten Fingers” encourage children to experience all the things they can do with their hands. Many librarians have used this rhyme as an opening activity to prepare for our storytime. It ends with “I can fold them quietly and hold them just so,” a perfect position for listening to stories.

How can parents help their children develop these skills? They could choose books such as Kay Chorao’s collection of multicultural poems *Rhymes Round the World*, which contains old favorites and new rhymes to be learned and used.

In “I Am Like a Bear” by Dog Chief, one can imagine the storyteller using sweeping hand gestures and body movement when telling this rhyme. The illustration of a child leaping into the air silhouetted by a bear-shaped cloud adds visually to this rhyme. The illustration continues onto the next page, transitioning nicely with animal shaped clouds for “Clouds in the Sky.” These two rhymes would complement “It Looked Like Spilt Milk” for a home storytime on clouds. Having children use their whole bodies to act like a bear will help them remember the words to this rhyme.

It would be easy to transform a traditional nursery rhyme into a wake up call in the morning with, “Are You Sleeping?” Singing with children can help prepare them for school as it helps them hear words broken down into smaller parts. This literacy suggestion is more successful with younger children than sleep-deprived teens.

Simple verses can stay with you for life. “Kookaburra” is a traditional Australian rhyme that Janet remembers singing as a young girl in Girl Scout troop meetings. This strong memory twines together laughter, eating gumdrops, and simple rhymes. While she didn’t know what a kookaburra was, that did not affect her enjoyment. Perhaps those memories are why she enjoys rhymes and singing and sharing them with children. Think how much easier it will be to sound out *kookaburra* when the child has already heard and said the word!

The illustrations of a young Polish child dancing in “Lizzie” focus on young children enthralled with spinning themselves round and round until they fall down. The illustrations raise the question of whether children still know and use wooden tops. This opens the door for a parent and child to engage in dialogic reading. The parent asks open-ended questions about the rhyme and the pictures. When the child answers, the parent reinforces what the child has said.
The conversation a parent can have with his or her child about just one poem can be astounding. Simply discussing the illustrations can be a big vocabulary builder. The clothing on the children, the design along the edge of the page, the number of animals on a page, the shapes, the similarities and differences in items all offer opportunities to ask questions or point to the page. For preschoolers, the learning continues when they start asking questions themselves.

Each activity leads up to producing a child who is ready to learn to read when he or she begins school. All this from a poem or rhyme.

**About the Authors**

**Janet Frye** is a youth assistant in the Tippecanoe County Public Library. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education and a master’s degree in Special Education from Ohio University. She is a former Kindergarten and preschool teacher and has been working in public libraries since 1989.

**Cathy Riley** is a youth librarian in Lafayette, Indiana. She received a bachelor’s degree in English from Indiana State University and a master’s degree in library science from Indiana University.