Like many infants and toddlers, 12-month-old Erin’s primary interest in books was turning the pages. As her mother read more quickly and tried to point out the pictures on each page, Erin continued to turn the pages, paying little attention to the pictures or to the words being read. One day, when reading a board book version of the popular children’s song ‘The Wheels on the Bus’ (Kubler, 2001), her mother began to sing the words as she pointed to the pictures mentioned in the song. Noticing a difference, Erin listened to all of the words on the page before her mother prompted her to turn to the next page. Every page was sung and then, after the last page, Erin pushed it toward her mother, indicating she wanted to hear it again.

Young children love to hear the human voice and enjoy music. Even before they are able to follow the sequence of a story, they love listening to simple songs and looking at pictures in books. Infants and toddlers like books with simple pictures and bright colors that reflect familiar things in their world. Books with a high contrast of colors and shapes and a nice mix of faces provide visual stimulation, while those with rhythmic language are perfect for young toddlers who are classifying the world and rapidly adding new words to their receptive and expressive vocabularies. Typically developing toddlers have acute hearing, and their attention is captured by the rhythmic and rhyming patterns found in virtually all song picture books. For example, young children delight in hearing “This old man, he played two. He played nick nack on my shoe. With a nick nack paddy whack, give a dog a bone. This old man came rolling home” (Adams, 2000).

Preschoolers’ developing sense of humor and growing interest in playing with words in rhythmic texts make song picture books ones that they will request time and time again. Raffi’s creative nonsense verse, coupled with Nadine Westcott’s delightfully humorous illustrations, make this old favorite a must! Many other books
play on traditional lyrics to promote language and comprehension in a humorous way. For example, in Eagle's *It's Raining, It's Pouring* (1997), the old man blows his nose and “He blew so hard that he moved the stars, but of course that wasn't easy!” (p. 8). Rob Gilbert's comical illustrations show not only the stars, but also a fence, a truck, and a cow in motion as a result of the old man's powerful sneeze. Older preschoolers and children in the early grades will delight in the adapted versions of well-known children's songs created by Iza Trapani. In *Mary Had a Little Lamb* (2003), the lamb gets into mischief during an impromptu walk around the farm: “And then one day the little lamb decided to be free, and so it wandered off along to see what it could see” (p. 4). The lamb raises the latch to let the horse out of the barn, an action that spurs a comical series of events that wreak havoc on the farm. The lamb ends up in the pigpen, covered in muck from head to hoof. In a similar vein, the well-known song “I Know an Old Lady” has been adapted to *I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Pie* (Jackson, 1997). After swallowing the Thanksgiving pie, “which was really too dry” (p. 1), she swallows cider “to moisten the pie” (p. 2) and on and on until she swallows the whole dinner—including the pot!

There are many song picture books from which to choose, and not all are designed with young children in mind. Careful selection, including attention to illustrations, length of verse, repetition and rhyme, and content, will help ensure appropriate book choices for young children, and will make for a pleasant way to link lyrics and literacy. The following sections share specific strategies for using song picture books to foster important emergent language and literacy skills.

**USING SONG PICTURE BOOKS TO SUPPORT EMERGENT LITERACY**

Research has shown that children enter the classroom with rich and varied language and literacy experiences (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). In many cases, it is such familiar routines as story time that mark the beginning of the child's literacy journey. Song picture books are wonderful tools for fostering emergent literacy skills; they can be used to develop concepts about books and print, language fluency, phonological awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and emergent writing abilities. Specific suggestions for building this foundation for lifelong literacy learning are outlined below.

**Strategies To Support Oral Language Development**

Oral language is the foundation for all later literacy learning; therefore, opportunities to further children's language growth should be built into every book-sharing experience (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004). An adult pointing to the pictures in the book as the words are sung focuses the young child's attention and helps her understand that everything has a name. In time, older toddlers and preschoolers will be able to point to the pictures as the book is shared. Children also will want to join in as adults mimic the actions in songs, such as book versions of *Isny, Itsy Spider* (Chapman, 2006) and *The Wheels on the Bus* (Kubler, 2001). Encouraging simple actions, such as clapping hands or stamping feet, while singing one of the many illustrated versions of *If You're Happy and You Know It* (e.g., Cabrera, 2005; Carter, 1997; Warhola, 2007), is a wonderful way to engage children in the song-book experience. Adults can easily change the words to add other body parts and actions (i.e., touch your nose, open your mouth) as the song is sung again and again. Various versions are already available. One such example is Cecily Kaiser's *If You're Angry and You Know It!* (2004). This adaptation, with words to reflect the opposite of happy—angry—is a good selection for preschool children who are already familiar with the original version. Through Kaiser's book, children learn techniques for coping with anger: bang a drum, take deep breaths, and walk away. While all young children may not be able to make all of the actions in exactly the same way as adults can, all of their attempts should be accepted with enthusiasm.

Through the repetitive singing of favorite songs and nursery rhymes, children will begin to memorize the words. As each verse becomes familiar, adults can play “fill in the blanks” by singing the beginning of a line of verse (e.g., “Jack and Jill went up the . . .”) and then pausing for children to supply the missing rhyme. This technique works especially well for those toddlers and young preschoolers who are not yet able to join in on the recitation of a complete verse.

**Strategies To Support Concepts About Books and Print**

As young children observe adults handling books, turning pages, and referring to pictures and to the text, they begin to acquire the important behaviors necessary for learning to read (Clay, 1991; Snow & Ninio, 1986). Preschoolers are often very insistent about hearing their favorite books read over and over again. On one of many repetitive readings, adults can point out to children the names of the author(s) and illustrator(s), the front of the book from the back, where to begin reading or singing, and the directionality of the print. The child can help turn the pages as the adult points to each word read, or sung, aloud. This fosters the understanding that the words on the page translate to the sounds the child hears.

Often, certain words or sounds that animals or ob-
jects make will be written in larger font. Pointing these words out, and explaining that the author wants us to say or sing these in a louder voice, focuses children's attention on the print, as does asking them to notice the repetition of words in the text. For example, the word “beep” appears 12 times on pages 5 and 6 of *The Wheels on the Bus* (Kubler, 2001). After reading “The horn on the bus goes Beep! Beep! Beep!” (p. 5), children can try to find the other occurrences of “beep” on these two pages. The adult can assist, as needed, by pointing out that each time the author uses the word “beep,” it is spelled the same way, b-e-e-p. These and other, similar actions help children develop book-handling skills and important concepts about books and print.

**Strategies To Support Language and Phonological Development**

Becoming phonologically aware is a complex process dependent upon many language experiences and activities that prepare children for later reading instruction (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004). The stages of phonological development, a process that begins during the preschool years, include such skills as rhyming; alliteration; and syllable and phoneme segmentation, deletion, and blending (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Lyrics in children’s songs are replete with sound devices that serve to help young children begin to focus on the sounds of language. To create rhythmic, flowing prose, lyricists use rhyme and repetition. Words and phrases are commonly repeated.

**Name of Rhyme/Poem/Song:** “I'm a Little Teapot”

**Props and Materials:** Various teapots and tea sets, chart with the words to the song and a picture, hot plate, whistling tea kettle with water

1. **Introduction of new song**

   If one is available, turn on a hot plate with a tea kettle of water so that it will whistle at the beginning of your group time. Engage children in a discussion about how some people really enjoy making and drinking tea. Talk about the sound that a tea kettle makes and the steam that rises from the kettle’s spout when the water begins to boil. Tell the children that you know a song about a teapot and that you are going to teach it to them.

   Sing the song, inviting anyone who already knows it to sing along. Then, teach the song by singing one line at a time and inviting children to repeat with you.

2. **Oral language development and discussion of new vocabulary**

   Show children a variety of teapots and ask them to describe each one’s color, shape, and size. Talk about the word *handle.* Ask children to talk about how the handles of the various teapots differ. (Some are rounded; some are more curved; some are larger than others; some form an arch over the top of the pot, while others are attached to the side of the pot.) Ask if the children can think of anything else that has a handle (e.g., cup, suitcase, basket, purse, etc.) Have a variety of these items available to display after children have a chance to share their thoughts. Discuss why the word *handle* applies to each and what a definition of a *handle* might be.

   Next, talk about the *spout* of the tea kettle or teapot. Ask the children why a kettle or teapot needs a spout. Pour the water out, and let the children see it go into the cup. Place the cup in a pan, and take the lid off of the teapot. Empty the water directly into the cup. Of course, water will splash into the pan. Let the children talk about why this happens, and talk about the purpose that the hole under the lid serves as well as the purpose of the spout.

   Ask the children if they can think of anything else that has a spout (e.g., garden hose, funnel, sink faucet, whale.) Discuss how each of these “spouts” differ and what a definition of a spout might be.

   Ask if anyone knows what the word *stout* means. Tell the children that *stout* means chubby, rounded, or somewhat fat. If possible, show a stuffed teddy bear with a round tummy. Ask children how the bear and the teapot look alike. (They are both rounded in the middle.) Show a tall, slender coffee pot, and talk about the opposite of *stout.* Invite the children to look at and feel both the coffee pot and the teapot and to tell the ways they are same and different.

   If possible, let the tea kettle simmer on the hot plate and talk about why it is not whistling the way it was at the beginning of the lesson. Ask if anyone knows how we can get it to whistle again. (Turn up the heat.)
and alliteration is often used, as in Miss Mary Mack (Hoberman, 2003): “Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack, all dressed in black, black, black, with silver buttons, buttons, buttons, all down her back, back, back” (p. 2). In this example, the repetition of the initial consonant letter “m” in the words “Miss,” “Mary,” and “Mack,” coupled with the repetitive vowel sounds, as in the words “mack,” “black,” and “back,” provides rhythm and rhyme. Assonance, or the repetition of vowel sounds, is also commonly used with alliteration. For example, the spider in Keith Chapman’s Itsy Bitsy Spider (2006) is “spinning silver silk webs” (p. 1). Note the repetition of both the initial consonant “s” and the short vowel “i.” Children will especially enjoy Chapman’s use of onomatopoeia: “The wind blows WHOOSH! SWOOOOOSH! and the spider bounces with a Boingggg!”

During repeated reading of song picture books featuring alliteration, children also can be asked to repeat the sounds heard at the beginning of words (e.g., Miss Mary Mack, Little Lamb) and to join in singing those phrases and sentences containing two or more words with the same initial sound. Identification of rhyming words can be fostered by first pausing to have children supply the missing rhyme in a line of text and then, after reading, by playing simple games in which children tell a word from the song that rhymes with a word supplied by the adult. For example, after reading a verse, such as “Green frog, green frog don’t come leaping. Can’t you see that baby’s sleeping?” in

Talk about why the kettle whistles when the water gets hot enough to boil. Talk about the steam that escapes from the spout. Sing the song with the children as you watch for the steam and listen for the whistle. Talk about the difference between steam and the words in the song (e.g., steamed up). (Steam is the vapor or gas that we see coming out of the kettle when the water boils. In the song, the teapot says it gets steamed up. That means that the water boils and steam comes out of the teapot or kettle.) Ask if the children have ever heard anyone talk about “getting steamed up.” (Sometimes people say that when they mean they are getting mad or angry.) If using a hot plate and whistling tea kettle, show how the steam reduces when the pot is tipped over to pour out its contents.

3. Singing the song

Sing the song again, using motions to accompany verses:

I'm a little teapot, short and stout (hands form circle in front of body)
Here is my handle (put right hand on hip)
And here is my spout (extend left arm with hand curved downwards)
When I get all steamed up, I just shout
Tip me over and pour me out! (bend to the left from waist)
Invite the children to use the motions while singing the song with you. Repeat several times. Some children may also enjoy holding a non-breakable teapot while singing the song.

4. Linking the song lyrics to print

Develop concepts about books and print as the song picture book I'm a Little Teapot (Trapani, 1997) is read and then sung. Discuss any differences that appear in the book and in the original version of the song. Then, show the original words to the song written on a large chart cut in the shape of a teapot. Point while the children sing the words, and then invite individual children to point while the song is sung again.

5. Developing phonological awareness

Ask children to listen carefully for words that rhyme (stout, spout, shout, out). As you call out pairs of words from the song, ask children to show you with a “thumbs up” or a “thumbs down” whether the two words rhyme (e.g., stout/spout, shout/pot).

6. Developing emergent writing

Invite the children to make up a new version of the song by generating possible words to go in the blanks:

“I'm a ____________/______ and __________/. Here is my __________/. Here is my __________/.” Children can write or dictate new versions of the song, and then the teacher can create song charts for each version and let each child teach his or her version to the class.

Figure 1, continued
A Selection of Children’s Song Picture Books

Ho’s (1996) *Hush! A Thai Lullaby*, children can be led to discover the rhyming words “leaping” and “sleeping.” Similarly, when examples of onomatopoeia are seen in text, calling attention to the words that are used to portray sound and asking children to suggest how to say the words in such a way as to give a hint to their meanings, assists in developing phonological awareness.

**Strategies To Support Vocabulary and Comprehension**

Children’s books are a rich source of vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002), and song picture books are no exception. Most young children will be unfamiliar with the meanings of many words in songs and books that are intended for their enjoyment. While some of the words will be peculiar to the book and not often used in other children’s books the child is likely to hear, those words the child is likely to hear again and again warrant discussion. These types of words are ones referred to by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan as “rich words.” For example, in Kubler’s (2001) version of *The Wheels on the Bus*, the parents on the bus “chat,” and in Trapani’s (2003) *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, we find the words “stray,” “hissed,” “escaping,” “realize,” “shriek,” and “sheepish.” During the initial reading or singing, the adult can insert a short definition or known synonym for a word believed to be unfamiliar to the child (Collins, 2005). After sharing a book containing one or more unfamiliar words, the adult can return to a page with a rich word and, in an easy-to-understand conversational manner, explain the word’s meaning and give several example sentences in which one might use or hear the word spoken. These “child-friendly explanations” (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) help children to form memorable associations for the new words. Inviting children to repeat the words, and talking about any personal associations they may have for the words, boosts the value of the book-sharing experience and promotes gains in vocabulary (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000).

Other activities designed especially to promote comprehension involve engaging children in analytic talk about a book (Dickinson & Smith, 1994). For example, as young children learn to distinguish between real and make-believe, the humor in many popular and adapted song picture books can spark interesting after-reading discussions about what could and could not happen in real life. In Caroline Church’s (2002) *Do Your Ears Hang Low?*, dogs are shown with ears that they can wave at each other, and in *Miss Mary Mack* (Hoberman, 2003), the elephant jumps a fence. More fantasy abounds in *I Know an Old Lady* (Owen, 2006) as progressively larger animals are eaten by the old lady, purportedly to eat the smaller ones previously...
devoured. Young children enjoy “feeding” the old lady pictures of the animals, an activity that reinforces an understanding of sequence of events.

Strategies To Support Emergent Writing
Song picture books are also wonderful tools for sparking children’s interest in using their imagination to create new verses for, or versions of, familiar songs. For example, after learning the song “Daddy’s Taking Us to the Zoo Tomorrow” and enjoying the song picture book Going to the Zoo (Paxton, 1996), children in Camille Breheny’s kindergarten classroom at St. Paul School in Macomb, Illinois, created their own version of the song. They began by dictating a list of other individuals who could take them someplace, such as mother, grandpa, and grandma. The teacher wrote these in place of the word “Daddy” in the song. Next, the children used environmental print representing places in their community to decide where they would go with each new person listed. As the children sang the song repeatedly, each time with the name of a new person, they inserted a different logo to indicate where they would be going. “Mommy’s taking us to Aurelio’s Pizza tomorrow” and “Grandpa’s taking us to Farm King” were two of their favorites, and children were eager to take turns pointing to the printed words as their new verse was sung. Another time, each student in Camille’s classroom dictated a new page for an innovation of a less-familiar song picture book titled Bear Facts (see photo 1). Written by Norma Gentner and illustrated by Philip Howe, this big book is part of The Song Box series published by Wright Group/McGraw-Hill. Through repetitive lyrics—“Oh, did you know, did you know, did you know, that bears have babies, eat honey, get furry, etc.”—Gentner shares factual information about bears. Since the children were learning about animals and animal babies, they each selected one favorite to illustrate. As can be seen in photos 2 through 5, children used a repetitive style borrowed from Gentner’s book to dictate text for their illustrations. For example, in photo 2, we see Sammy’s illustration of pigs and piglets and his verse, “Oh, did you know, did you know, did you know that pigs have babies, babies, out on the farm, out on the farm? We call them piglets. We call them piglets.” In photo 7, we see the cover of the big book created by the children, titled “Oh, Did You Know?”

The following three steps can assist teachers in planning for use of song picture books to support early language and literacy development:

- **Step One: Learning the Song**
  - Play music, sing the song, talk about unfamiliar words and ideas, add motions
• Step Two: Linking the Song to Print
  - Share song picture book or chart with song lyrics
  - Invite children to join in reading/singing the song with you

• Step Three: Extending the Song
  - Invite children to illustrate their own version of song
  - Create new verses of the song with the children
  - Whenever possible, insert children's names into the song.

These three steps have been incorporated into the sample lesson plan shown in Figure 1. Using the well-known song “I’m a Little Teapot” and the related song picture book by Trapani (1997), teachers can foster the language and literacy skills discussed in this article.

**Summary**

Adults and children alike can find enjoyment in sharing picture books of well-loved songs. Familiar book patterns, such as the ones found in song picture books, help young children develop control and confidence as beginning readers and writers.

Studies have shown that children's expressive language and vocabulary increase through read-aloud experiences (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Whitehurst et al., 1999). In addition, both music and song enhance the learning process by promoting language, phonological awareness, and vocabulary (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant, 1995). Many readers will be surprised at the sheer volume of song picture books on the market today. Figure 2 lists a few more of the many available for children of all ages. By incorporating song picture books into the read-aloud experience, adults can support young children's early language and literacy development in enjoyable and meaningful ways.

**References**


**Children's Books Cited**


