

AGECS member, Ellinor Campbell, shares Rosemary Milne's love of poetry. In this article Ellinor discusses the many different ways early childhood educators can share poetry with children in "a whole range of ways and settings."

The JOY of POETRY with young children
Ellinor Campbell

*Now frogs can jump while spiders crawl,
which is, I think, the best for all.
I'm pretty sure your heart would thump
if frog could crawl and spiders JUMP!*

How often is poetry used and enjoyed in early childhood programs? I suspect not nearly enough. We, as early childhood practitioners, are good at reading stories, and we provide regular music in our programs even if we are not musical. However, we often feel uncomfortable with poetry. In this article I hope to encourage you to rediscover the pleasure and value of using poetry with young children.

From birth, children are avid listeners, and they very soon pick up differences in words and subtle nuances of speech. Within a few months they are playing with words as they endlessly repeat sounds, which initially are the same no matter what the language background.

Inside a year they can understand their mother-tongue, and their babble is becoming more refined with the help of parents' instinctive use of baby-talk, something which forms a bridge between the child's language and the language of adults.

Many adults at this stage naturally use rhymes they remember from their own childhood. Some of these old favourites are sung, but others are spoken, for example, *'This Little Piggy Went to Market'*, and *'Round and Round the Garden Like a Teddy Bear'*.

Unfortunately there is a tendency for the use of poetry to go no further than Nursery Rhymes. Once children become more competent speakers, language is used more as an academic tool, and the pleasure of playing with words is forgotten. In part, this may arise from our insistence on the use of 'correct' words such as *'sheep'* for *'baa-lamb'* and *'train'* for *'choochoo'*.

Denying the natural development of baby-talk is the beginning of a move away from using words for pleasure. It's a pity, for the sound of words can be so evocative. For example, in *'Steam Train'* *.

*Clacketty - clack, clacketty - clack,
clatter the wheels along the track...*

We need to remember that language is a fundamental skill and its development is an interactive process. Children need to have a verbally stimulating environment and be active participants in the communication process. Fortunately, children have a natural interest in the words, sounds and rhythms that form the basis of poetry. It is never too early to start using poetry in early interactions. Imagine holding a little baby and crooning a variation on the lines from *'Me'* *.

*I love your nose, I love its place,
in the middle of your face.
I love your ears, your mouth, your eyes...
each of them the perfect size...*

Who hasn't seen a small child watching a line of ants! You can almost hear their minds ticking over: What are they? Where are they going? How do they walk up a wall? In *'Ants'* *:

*Ants don't need to follow signs
they walk in long black wiggly lines.*

Thomas, five years old, said:

*"Ants crawl on floors, they're marching.
They take their food inside their house."*

Words in verse-form are powerful, for they can help children to take control of their world, understand emotions and abandon fears. The imagery of poetry gives pleasure, enrichment, satisfaction and an understanding of feelings and fears.

Poems can be used formally in small groups with older children, or spontaneously with children of all ages. In group situations children will enjoy sharing the humour, the information and the rhymes. Poems can be used separately, or as a precursor to pictures, discussions and stories. They can also provide a special finish to a story on the same topic.

Most importantly, poetry can be used wherever children and adults are sharing communication-time. Short poems are easily learned and can be spoken wherever appropriate, such as when children are splashing in puddles: *'Puddles'* *, playing with a ball: *'Me'* *, digging in a sand pit: *'Mud'* *- , or enjoying imaginative games: *'I'd like to be...'* * .

Poetry can be enhanced by the use of expressions, gestures and body movements. These movements can be small or large according to the situation, and children can be encouraged to develop their own actions. Some poems particularly encourage bigger actions, as in *'Me'* *, which can be used from toddlers up:

*Look at me I stand so tall!
I run and jump and catch a ball...*

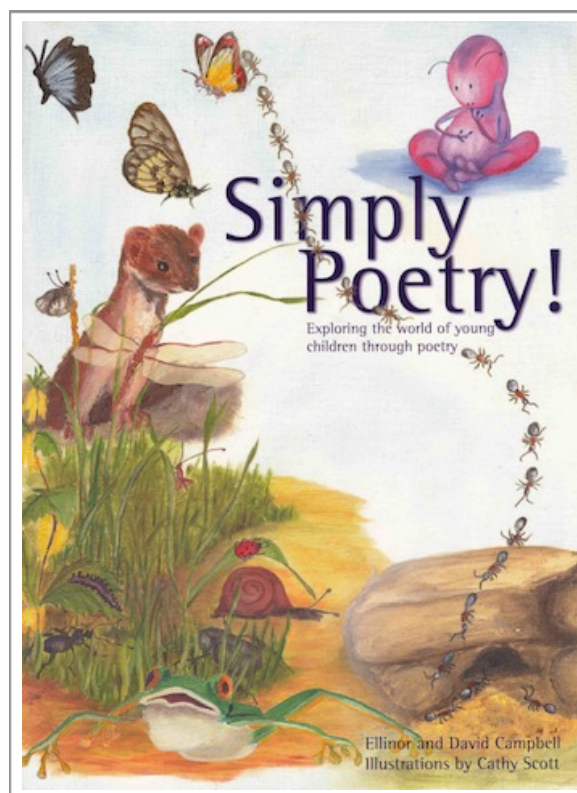
You may like to try to write poetry alone, or share with children the pleasure of experimenting with rhyming language. It is important when doing so to keep it simple, and to stick to rhymes, not free verse. Informal occasions are particularly useful for making up new rhymes with children. For example, simple rhymes such as 'hand' and 'sand' are obvious for a sand pit, and children will love trying out words with you.

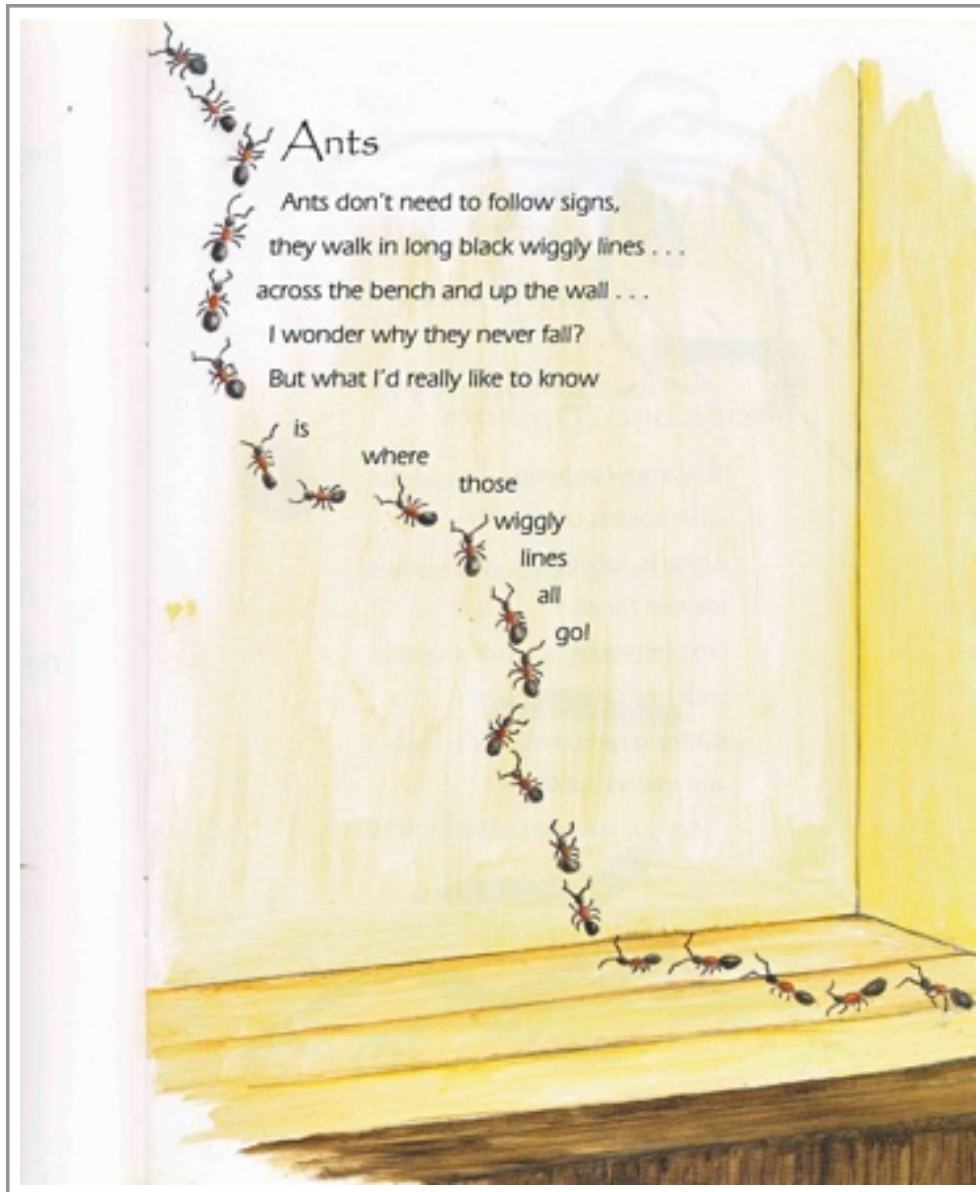
I hope you may be inspired to participate with children in rhythm and word games in a whole range of ways and settings.

* **Simply Poetry!** By Ellinor and David Campbell, a poetry/picture book of original poems for children from babies to early school years, with coloured illustrations by Cathy Scott. Tertiary Press. RRP \$24.95. This book has won an award for Excellence in Educational Publishing.

* **Gooley Chewy**

An anthology of original poems for children aged from four to eight years by Annette Kossaris and David Campbell, with some line illustrations by Troy Carlson. Kindamindi Publishing.





Ellinor Campbell is an experienced kindergarten teacher and facilitator with pre- school education. She offers in-services to early childhood professionals in poetry, and also techniques of story-telling. Her aim is to inspire teachers to participate with children in rhyme, rhythm, word games and story-telling. Ellinor says: "These are wonderful mediums for supporting and helping receptive, expressive, and written language skills in a range of ways which appeal instinctively to children".

Email: davcampbell@iprimus.com.au

Tel: (03) 9583 2736