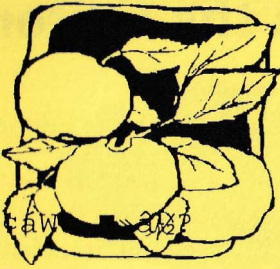


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## *A Letter to Canada from Kincardine*

**Carol Leigh Wehking talks with Jan Andrews and Glenna  
Janzen**

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# The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program: Storytelling at the Heart

by Celia Lottridge

*From Carol Leigh Wehking: Faithful readers: I, your ink-jet stained associate editor, asked Celia Lottridge (recently retired Executive Director) to write for this issue of AQ an article about the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program. She was the first executive director, and nurtured it into an international programme, with associate programmes and offshoots all over Canada, north, south, east and west, as well as the U.S. and Bermuda. The programme is based in the oral tradition, relying heavily on storytelling as well as rhymes and songs, to accomplish its goals. Celia graciously agreed to give us a retrospective.*

The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program is as simple as a bouncing rhyme and as complicated as the evolving relationship between a parent and a child. In the program, the teachers and the participants say rhymes together, sing songs together, and tell, and listen to stories. The children who come are from two weeks to four years old. The adults range from eighteen year old parents to seventy-something grandparents.

The key word is *together*. Everyone joins in. Each adult has brought a child to bounce, to smile at, to cuddle. Each child has his or her own adult to lean against, to share the fun of the actions and words with, and many other children to interact with. And the adults have other adults to talk with, to laugh with, to learn to care about, as well as a variety of children to lend a lap to, to notice, to enjoy. A Mother Goose group becomes a community.

From doing the rhymes, singing the songs, and hearing the stories, come many learnings. Parents and children take away rhymes and songs to use in their everyday lives, in good times and in bad. The connection between parent and child may deepen. Parents may gain new awareness of their child's responses to

words, rhythms, and touch. Children (and adults) will learn new words. Their imaginations will be invigorated. Everyone will relax and have fun.

Where is storytelling in all this? It is the bedrock that underlies under all of the teaching and activity of the PCMGP. Joan Bodger and Barry Dickson created the pilot project that was the beginning of the program because they understood the power of the words and patterns and images of stories. And they knew that storytelling connects the teller and the listener: that the experience of storytelling is always shared.

The stories used in the program range from simple action rhymes, to rhymes with characters and plots, to basic pattern stories, to complicated fairy tales.

The simple action rhyme may not have a plot, but it has a shape. For example:

*Earkin, hearkin,  
Eyekin, spykin,  
Cheeky, chucky,  
Chin chin chin  
And down the hatch!*

A baby will experience this rhyme kinaesthetically as his mum or dad touches his ears, eyes, cheeks, and chin in a rhythmic and patterned way and then tickles him down his body to his tummy—the climax of the story. A baby quickly learns that this climax is both predictable and worth waiting for. The parent sees that the baby is waiting eagerly for him or her to do the expected tickle. The two of them are in something together, something created by spoken word and touch. A story.

Very quickly the rhyme/stories get more complicated:

*Leg over leg  
The dog went to Dover  
When he came to a stile  
Whoops! He went over.*

Again the baby experiences the rhyme as patterned touch—in this case crossing the child's feet, one over the other, back and forth. And the climax is a lift of the baby's bottom, a very satisfying ending which babies wait for eagerly. But here we also have a character and a setting which the teller (the adult saying the rhyme) can imagine. What kind of dog is this? What colour? What is a stile? All of this is fun for the group to discuss and brings out the story aspect of the rhyme. As the baby who is enjoying the rhyme acquires language she will ask for the "dog" and she will anticipate hearing about his simple adventures once more, because she can enjoy its images in her imagination, and its rhythm and pattern with her whole body.

Then, of course, there are true "story rhymes" with characters, a hint of a setting, and a bit of plot. If you ask children who have grown up with nursery rhymes what their favourite stories are, they often name *Humpty Dumpty* or *Little Miss Muffet*. Or:

*Doctor Foster  
Went to Gloucester  
In a shower of rain  
He stepped in a puddle  
Right up to his middle  
And never went there again.*

This can be a bouncing rhyme with a chance for an exciting drop between the bouncer's knees, but in the Mother Goose Program we also see the rhyme as a story about the doctor's unfortunate adventure. To bring this out, we might do a short visualization. What does the doctor look like? How about the weather on this ill-fated day? Another time, we could extend the rhyme into a more complete story by asking a question such as: why did Dr. Foster go to Gloucester anyway? what did the people of Gloucester do when they saw the doctor's predicament?

But what about real stories? Aren't most of the children too young for stories that go on for a while and do not involve bouncing or hugging? The children may be too young, but the adults are not. I remember that when the pattern for the program was being developed in the pilot project, Joan Bodger felt that we

were asking the parents to do rhymes with their babies for the shared joy of it. By telling stories to the parents, we, in our turn, would be doing something similar for the parents. So we began telling a story to the parents at the end of each session.

Our experiences in those early groups have been repeated in many Mother Goose groups in many places. Some of the participants welcome the stories the way flowers welcome rain after a dry spell. They simply soak them up. Others are puzzled. Surely stories are for children. Why are we telling them to adults? Some of these doubters come to love the stories. Others tolerate them because they enjoy the rhymes and songs. And some participants turn out to be wonderful storytellers themselves and take the stories home to their other children. Sometimes, a mother or a grandmother will bring us a story, maybe one she remembers from her childhood in another place.

We always tell folk tales in the Mother Goose Program and often stories about women who overcome adversity or are clever or who find their own destinies. Three favourites are "Tippin-gee" (from *The Magic Orange Tree* by Diane Wolkstein), "Whitebear Whittington" (from *Grandfather Tales* by Richard Chase) and various versions of "The Husband who had to Mind the House".

The central place of storytelling in the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program is natural because the program was originated by Joan Bodger, a storyteller through and through, and later carried on by myself and Katherine Grier, also storytellers. As the program grew in the Toronto area, other storytellers became involved as teachers. Equally important are the many program participants who were introduced to storytelling by the program and have become storytellers themselves and also program teachers.

In the last few years, the program has grown far beyond Toronto. We have trained people working in agencies serving families across the country to be Mother Goose Teachers. Most of these people had not previously done any storytelling, or if they had, they had not consciously thought of themselves as storytellers.

How do we keep storytelling at the heart of the program in these circumstances? It is a challenge, but one we work on constantly in several ways:

1. Storytelling is a major component in our two-day PCMGP Teacher Training Workshops. All of the trainers are experienced storytellers who have become skilled in teaching people how to begin to learn and tell stories. In each workshop the trainer can see participants who are eager to become good storytellers.

2. We provide Associate Parent-Child Mother Goose Programs with an expanding group of storytelling resources including a soon-to-be-published storytelling manual.

3. We encourage Mother Goose Teachers to become involved in local storytelling organizations, and to attend workshops, events and festivals. We are also developing follow-up storytelling workshops to be offered regionally.

4. We are encouraging storytellers across the country to become aware of local Mother Goose Programs, recognize that they are a real part of the storytelling community and reach out to the teachers of these programs.

We believe that the storytelling that happens in a Parent-Child Mother Goose Program can greatly enrich the lives of all the participants. The rhymes, the songs, and the stories can be a shared joy within the program, between the children who come and those who care for them, and in the wider families of these adults and children. Like the program itself, a rhyme or a story can provide an experience that is both simple, and many layered, an experience that takes place within the safe and magical space created by a teller, a listener, and a story.

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