

Playground Folkgames and the Community of Children

by Jean Alexander

Observe any elementary school playground during recess: children are running, playing tag, throwing balls, jumping rope, hopping hopscotch, playing jacks, hitting, hiding, clapping hands, and singing. To adult spectators, this buzzing beehive of activity may seem chaotic, but the chaos appears only to them. The rules of the games are obscured by the noise and the action; boundaries, forbidden areas, and "it" figures – structures rigorously adhered to by the children. The shared knowledge of these games and the lore that accompanies them binds this community of children together. Friends teach the games to other friends, who discover them as new and original. Most children would probably be surprised to know that their parents played the same games, and their parents would probably be surprised to know that many of these games are several hundred years old!

Most playground games can be described as either verbal or non-verbal action games. The non-verbal games, such as football, are usually played by boys. On the schoolgrounds, teams might be designated by classroom teachers' names: Miss Torrence's boys take the name of the Torrence Broncos and play against Rouselle's Raiders. Fantasy is common; the boys pretend. During the games they are not just fifth- or sixth-graders. Individuals become Lester Hayes, Jim Plunkett, or other football heroes in their mighty dramas. Meanwhile, the younger boys watch closely and go on to practice their skills in less organized ways, and play tag, and bother the girls, and dream of being older.

Girls tend to play the verbal action games. They start as first-, second-, and third-graders with circle and clapping games, moving up to such highly skilled complexities as the Double Dutch jump rope game in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades.

Accompanying this action are certain rhymes that are chanted as the games are played. The rhymes change during the course of years; some older ones are modified or abandoned, some new ones are invented. Yet the structure of the games remains constant.

Jean Alexander is a school librarian with the Washington, D.C. Schools. She has collected children's games and has been associated with the Festival of American Folklife since 1974.



1 Jumping rope on Easter Monday circa 1900
PHOTO FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

2 Capture the Flag FRANCIS BENJAMIN JOHNSTON
PHOTO FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. 1899





1

1 Jumping rope – Single style. 1973 WASHINGTON
STAR PHOTO BY PETER COPELAND
2 Double Dutch sequence, Festival of American
Folklife 1978 FESTIVAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLIFE PHOTO

In the Children's Area the visitor to the Festival of American Folklife will see the singing games of Washington-area children. the games are: circle games, clapping games, cheers, and jump rope games.

Circle Games

A circle game is a circle of children with one in the middle,
Donna died. (center)

Oh. How she die? (center)

She died like this. (center makes a motion)

She died like this. (center mirrors motion)

(The rhyme is repeated with new motion.)

Donna's livin'! (center) *Oh! Where she livin'?* (circle)

She livin' in a country called Tennessee. (all)

She wears short short skirts up above the knee.

She's goin' to shake that thing wherever she goes.

Hands up. Tootsie. Tootsie. Tennessee.

Hands down. Tootsie. Tootsie. Tennessee.

Touch the ground. Tootsie. Tootsie. Tennessee.

To the front, to the back, to the sy, sy, sy,

To the front, to the back, to the sy, sy, sy.

Oh, she never went to college.

She never went to school.

And I found out she was an educated fool.

Clapping Games

Clapping games are very popular on the playgrounds. This one – Ronald McDonald – is clapped with four players. Each pair claps under and over the other pair.

Ronald McDonald

Ronald McDonald like frenchfries.

Ronald McDonald like frenchfries.

O-o shee shee wa-wa. Frenchfries.

I found another. Frenchfries

She saw the sweet. Frenchfries

Just like a cherry tree. Frenchfries.

Ronald McDonald like hamburger.

Ronald McDonald like hamburger.

O-o shee shee wa-wa. Hamburger.

I found another. Hamburger.

She saw the sweet. Hamburger.

Just like a cherry tree. Hamburger

Ronald McDonald like milkshake.

Ronald McDonald like milkshake.

O-o shee wa-wa. Milkshake.

She saw the sweet. Milkshake.

Just like a cherry tree. Milkshake.



Cheers

The third type of singing game is called a cheer. Cheers are usually made up of new rhymes and they change often. Cheers tend to show off an individual's ability to perform splits and cartwheels. They are performed in a line with each girl performing alone as the song chanted moves down the row.

D-I-S-C-O. This is how my drill team go.

Right on. Hey. Hey. Right on.

My name is Shana. Foxy Brown.

You come my way, I knock you down.

My sign is Virgo with a V.

If you don't like it, come see me.

Oh. Shana. Get down. (splits and cartwheels)

Jump Rope Games

The rhymes that have been around the longest are the rhymes used for single rope jumping. Many old favorites have been around for several generations. In Shirley Temple (formerly called Charlie Chaplin), two children turn a rope and one or two jump and act out the rhyme.

Shirley Temple went to France

To teach the girls the hula hula dance.

A heel, a toe. Around we go.

Salute to the Captain. Bow to the Queen.

Touch the bottom of the submarine.

I wish I had a nickel.

I wish I had a dime.

I wish I had a boyfriend to kiss me all the time.

I'd make him wash the windows.

I'd make him scrub the floor.

And when he was finished, I'd kick him out the door.

Double Dutch is the game that demands the most skill. Two turners rapidly swing two long ropes in opposite directions as the jumper dances between them. A typical rhyme used in a game of Double Dutch is:

D-I-S-H Double Dutch, Spanish.

I was told that the boys kiss the girls.

So take a trip around the world.

Hey. Hey. Scoobie Doobie.

Kick one. Hawaiian Islands.

Kick two. Hawaiian Islands. (until jumper misses.)

Why is the folklore of the community of children important? Primarily because it is important to the children themselves. The games allow them to direct and to be in control of their lives. In these games they test limits and boundaries, obey or disobey authority figures, and hone their physical skills to the utmost. After playing these games the children can return to their adult-directed lives with the pleasure of having been in charge of themselves.

We adults can learn from this childlore, and appreciate the richness of that lore that has been handed down from child to child from one playground to another. Once upon a time, we, as children, exchanged this lore, too.

Suggested Reading

Abrahams, Roger D. *Jump Rope Rhymes: A Dictionary*. Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1969.

Acker, Ethel F. *Four Hundred Games For School, Home and Playground*. Dansville, N.Y.: F.A. Owen Publishing Co., 1923.

Burroughs, Margaret Taylor. *Did You Feed My Cow?: Street Games, Chants And Rhymes*. Chicago and New York: Follet Publishing Company, 1969.

Knapp, Mary and Herbert. *One Potato, Two Potato . . . The Secret Education of American Children*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976.

Newell, William Wells. *Games and Songs of American Children*. New York: Dover Press, 1963. First published in New York 1883; revised in 1903.

Opie, Iona and Peter. *Children's Games in Street and Playground*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Opie, Iona and Peter. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

Skolnik, Peter L. *Jump Rope!* New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1974.

Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Folkgames of Children*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1972.

Film

Children Chants and Games. BFA Educational Media, 2211 Michigan Avenue, Santa Monica, Calif. 90404

Discography

Jones, Bessie. *Step It Down: Games for Children*. Rounder Records, 186 Willow Avenue, Somerville, Mass. 02144