

LEAVING IT ALL UP TO CHANTS

Use this activity to explore the rhythmic linguistic play of traditional hand games and transform them into original social dances.

Materials Needed: handout with playground chants (see next page), space for movement

1. Tell students that playground hand-clapping games and schoolyard chants are forms of “linguistic play.” They’re creative uses of language, rhythm and movement passed down for generations, especially significant in Black girl culture and African-American communities. Ask: *Who remembers playing, or still plays, hand-clapping games with friends? What do you notice or remember about the lyrics and rhythms?* Reference the handout on the following page and note that these games have roots in African-American oral traditions.
2. Divide students into small groups. Have each group select one playground chant from the handout. Ask groups to read it aloud several times. If they know it, invite them to clap out the rhythm and notice repetition or rhyming patterns. If they don’t know it, ask them to create a clapping rhythm for it. Ask: *What’s the tempo (fast/slow)? Where are the strong rhythmic beats (beginning/middle/end of each phrase)? What emotions does your song/rhyme explore?*
3. Ask them to map their rhyme to two counts of eight (16 total beats), a standard structure for many chants or social dances. Instruct them to count out loud: “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 ; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.” Then say the chant while counting, adjusting to fit 16 beats. **Note:** Some rhymes may need shortening or repeating to fit. *Figuring this out is all part of the creative process!*
4. Invite groups to create a new social dance by brainstorming movements inspired by their chant, thinking about literal gestures that connect to the lyrics and then segueing into an exploration of more complex movement and rhythm. Remind students that social dances often include footwork, upper body movement, level changes and group coordination. Offer groups prompts to use like: *What movements match the rhythm or connect to the words? What movements show the emotions? What movement will start your dance? Where do you want to include repetition? How will you transition from one movement to the next? What will your ending move or pose be?*
5. Give groups time to rehearse their dance, working toward memorization and synchronization. Then, have groups perform their social dances for the class. Choose a format: showcase style (each group performs once), teach-back (each group teaches their dance, then everyone does it together) or cypher (groups perform in a circle). **Note:** Offer groups the option of dividing their small groups into chanters and dancers for students who may not want to do both. Make sure to celebrate each group as they perform their chant and dance!

Reflection Questions:

What surprised you about this process?

These playground games have been passed down for generations. Why do you think certain rhymes and games survive while others are forgotten?

How did collaborating with your group shape the final dance? What compromises or creative solutions did you have to make together?

Teacher Tip:

Use the following links to hear some playground chants aloud and watch video demonstrations of the traditional movements. You can follow along to the lyrics with the handout on the following page!

[“Miss Mary Mack”](#)

[“Down by the Banks”](#)

[“Miss Susie Had a Steamboat”](#)



PLAYGROUND CHANTS AND HAND GAMES



This page includes traditional playground chants and hand-clapping games that have been passed down through generations. Each rhyme includes the lyrics and a sentence about how the chant is traditionally performed. There are many regional variations of these games. The versions here are common, but your version might be different. That's okay! Let that spark discussion with your peers.

Miss Mary Mack

This is typically performed by two players facing each other. Rhythm notes: Strong beat on repeated words (Mack, Mack, Mack).

*Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack
All dressed in black, black, black
With silver buttons, buttons, buttons
All down her back, back, back*

*She asked her mother, mother, mother
For fifty cents, cents, cents
To see the elephants, elephants, elephants
Jump over the fence, fence, fence*

*They jumped so high, high, high
They reached the sky, sky, sky
And didn't come back, back, back
Till the Fourth of July, ly, ly!*

Down by the Banks

This is typically played as a circle game where players pass a hand slap around. The goal is to avoid being "out" when the rhyme ends on you. The rhythm speeds up toward the end and the final "ker-PLOP" is the exclamation point!

*Down by the banks of the Hanky Panky
Where the bullfrogs jump from bank to banky
With a hip, hop, hippity hop
Leap off the lily pad and go ker-PLOP!*

Alternate version:

*Down by the banks of the Hanky Panky
Where the bullfrogs jump from bank to banky
With an eeps, ipes, opes, oops
Missed the lily pad and went ker-PLOP!*

Miss Susie Had a Steamboat

(or "Miss Lucy Had a Steamboat")

This is a classic hand-clapping rhyme that has a playful "trick" structure where each verse seems to lead to an inappropriate word but pivots to something innocent.

*Miss Susie had a steamboat
The steamboat had a bell (ding ding)
Miss Susie went to heaven
The steamboat went to...*

*Hello operator
Please give me number nine
And if you disconnect me
I'll chop off your...*

*Behind the 'frigerator
There was a piece of glass
Miss Susie sat upon it
And broke her little...*

*Ask me no more questions
Tell me no more lies
The boys are in the bathroom
Zipping up their...*

*Flies are in the meadow
The bees are in the park
Miss Susie and her boyfriend
Are kissing in the D-A-R-K, dark, dark, dark*

