

# Ideas for Teaching & Practicing a New Song in Primary

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The method(s) I choose to teach a song depend on the song, why I am teaching it, and whether I am teaching it to Jr. or Sr. Primary.

**TYPE OF SONG:** I spread my teaching over several weeks or months for songs that are really long, have a lot of big words, or have a lot of verses.

**PURPOSE:** I change how I teach the song depending on whether I am using the song to make a particular doctrinal point (such as the song *Repentance*), we're learning it to solve a problem like remembering children's names (such as the song *Here We Are Together*), or we're learning it for fun (like *It's Autumntime*).

**LEVEL:** I use many of the same strategies in both levels, but Junior Primary needs more actions, more multisensory activities, more repetitions, and more frequent changes of activity than Senior Primary.

## KEY PRINCIPLES:

**1) ALWAYS MAKE THE SONG AS CONCRETE & MULTISENSORY AS POSSIBLE:** This makes the songs easier for the children to remember. The more senses you involve, the more copies of the information the brain stores in different places, making it easier for the brain to remember it later. This means I use a lot of actions, experiences, movement, pictures, and sound effects. Egg shakers, finger lights, paper plates, pictures, puppets, musical instruments, rhythm sticks, ribbon wands, scarves, etc., are all helpful tools for this. Sis. Sharla Dance has great ideas on her website for using those things.

**2) BREAK SONGS INTO BITE-SIZED CHUNKS:** I almost NEVER teach the whole song start to finish by doing a whole line at a time. Instead, I chunk the song into meaningful phrases, teach one tiny chunk at a time, and then practice that chunk over and over and over again in lots of different ways.

One of my favorite ways to do this is the "echo" method. I sing the phrase while pointing to myself, then I point to them and they sing it. Then I change how I'm singing it (maybe softer, louder, slower, faster, with actions), and they copy that. (You do have to give your pianist verbal cues so they know not to move on until you signal them.) We might stick with just the first phrase and do it 10 different ways before moving on. Then we do the 2nd phrase 10 different ways, then we put the 2 phrases together before moving on to a new line. That might mean that we sing a song with our normal voices, then holding our noses, then with our eyes closed. That might mean that we learn the first line of the song and hop to it, then we do it again but while spinning around, then again while doing jumping jacks. It might mean that we sing one part softly, then loudly, then slowly, then quickly. Then maybe one class sings the first line, another the 2nd line, and another the 3rd line. There are a million things you can do with a song.

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For example, for *The Books in the New Testament*:

**Watch me:** I sang, “Matthew, Mark, Luke, John” as I did the actions that go with that chunk.

**Now you copy me:** I sang: “Matthew, Mark, Luke, John” and did the actions, then pointed to them and they did it with me.

**Now let’s see if you can do it 3x in a row without stopping:** We did that.

**Then I modeled the next chunk:** “The Acts and the Romans” (I did the actions)

**Then I pointed to them and just after we sang each part, I quickly said:** This is how you say “acts” in sign language. Acts are things we do, and the Book of Acts tells about the things Jesus did when He was alive.” Then I pointed to them and they sang and signed “the Acts.” Then I told them that Romans were soldiers, so we were going to salute like a soldier for that one.

**Now let’s see if you can do the whole thing:** We did.

**Can you do it faster?** We did. You get the idea.

In Junior Primary, I don’t even try to teach the whole first verse (or whatever verse we are learning) in a single Sunday. It is okay for them to just sing the first line or two of the song on one Sunday, review it the next Sunday, and then add one phrase each week. I often teach the chorus first, and then add the first 2 lines the week, and the last 2 lines the following week.

**3) CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR 100% PARTICIPATION:** I try to plan activities that allow everyone to have a turn at the same time. When that is impossible, then I try to think of “fun” things half of the room can do with their bodies, faces, hands, or voices while the other half is having a turn with whatever the activity or object is.

**4) “DO” AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE:** Actions, ASL, bending forward and backward, clapping their hands, hopping, jumping jacks, marching, rolling their hands, running in place, spinning, standing up and then sitting down, stretching up tall, swaying side to side, tiptoeing, waving their arms, etc., all work well as we sing. Try to limit your talking so that it is minimal. I will call out instructions as they are singing (i.e., “Sing this part to Sis. Primary President!” or “Hop with me on this part!”). I also make little doctrinal connections in transitions between songs (Did you know that Jesus....?). Sometimes I ask a question and have them “think, whisper into their hand, then tell their teacher or share with a partner,” but mostly, I try to have them singing, singing, singing. Because they are doing stuff with their bodies, they don’t care that we are repeating the same song over and over.

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**5) EMBED THE SONG IN ACTIVITIES THEY WANT TO REPEAT:** The children need to hear the phrases you are teaching over and over and over again in a short period of time so that they become embedded in their brains. So I try to plan activities that they WANT to do over and over again so that they naturally practice the song repeatedly.

**6) GIVE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS:** I try to keep my instructions for things to one sentence when I can, with as few words as possible. My personal rule is no more than 5 steps, with 7 or fewer words per step.

Example 1: Sing when I point to you

Example 2:

- a) Hold the paper plates.
- b) Watch what I do.
- c) Copy me.

When I do this, they understand the activities better, it saves more time for learning the song, and they children respond SO much better! It is tricky at first and requires you to plan your instructions as well as the activities, but eventually, you get to where you can generate them on the spot.

### STRATEGIES THAT WORK WELL:

**ACTIONS/ASL:** Teach with actions or ASL. Example: *The World Is So Big*

The world is so big – Hold arms in a circle in front of you

And oh, so round – Spin around with arms still held in a circle in front of you

And in it – Hop up and down and point to the floor

God's creations are found – Gesture upward toward the ceiling

Mountains – Stand on tip toes with arms above your head and fingers touching (like a mountain top)

And valleys – Squat and make a V shape with your arms

And trees – Stand with arms high up in the air and wave them like trees

So tall – Leave arms high in the air, but now stand up on tip toes and stretch as high as you can

Animals big – Sing the words in a deep, low voice as you hold arms in a circle in front of you, and rock side to side like a heavy elephant walking

And animals small – Sing words in a tiny, high-pitched voice as you squat and make yourself tiny

The world is so big – Hold arms in a circle in front of you

And oh, so round – Spin around with arms still held in a circle in front of you

God loves us all – Gesture upward toward the ceiling then hug yourself

His blessings abound – Spread arms wide

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**AEROBICS:** I continuously change actions as we are singing and the children have to copy me (i.e., running in place, jumping jacks, bending forward and backward, twisting from side to side, hopping on one foot, toe touches, snapping my fingers, clapping my hands, rolling my arms, reaching for the sky, waving my arms, spinning around in a circle, etc.)

**AMPLIFIER** - You sing it softly, they sing it back to you loudly.

**ECHO CHAMBER:** You sing it loudly, they sing it back to you softly like an echo.

**ERASE A WORD:** Post pictures or words to the song on a chalkboard or whiteboard. Roll dice to determine how many pictures/words to erase, then sing the song. Keep repeating until all the pictures/words have been erased (or you run out of time).

**FOUR CORNERS:** I divide the Primary into 4 sections, give each section a line of the song, and they stand and sing the line of their song when it comes up, then they rotate which line they have and we do it again. (Others in this group have posted more interesting/fun ways to play this.)

**HOT POTATO:** Children pass a soft ball or stuffed animal around as we sing. When the pianist stops, they have to answer a question about the song, or sing/say the next line of the song, or do the corresponding action for whatever we just sang.

**I SPY:** Post pictures that represent key words and phrases from the song around the room. Give each child a toilet paper tube or a finger light. Sing the song slowly, pausing after each phrase. Ask children to look around the room to find the relevant picture and to point their “binoculars” or their finger lights at the correct pictures once they find them. (For example, this activity works well with the visual aids the church provided for *I’m Trying to Be Like Jesus*.)

**JACK-IN-THE-BOX:** I pass out picture cards with a word on them to various members of the Primary Presidency. When the Primary sings that particular word, the Presidency member pops up and does an action or some other unexpected thing to show that they are the person who had the secret word.

**LEFT/RIGHT:** Left half sings first ½, right half sings 2nd ½ of phrase (Examples: *He Sent His Son, The Lord Gave Me a Temple*)

**MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO:** You sing while doing RANDOM actions and the children have to try to follow you, repeating what you said and did.

**MY TURN, YOUR TURN:** You sing the first phrase, then have the children echo you.

**ON THE SPOT:** You sing it and then point to a class and the class stands and sings it back to you.

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**OPPOSITES:** I hold signs containing opposites and the Primary has to sing or do actions based on the sign I hold up (i.e., loud/soft, fast/slow, boys/girls, teachers/children, sing/hum, jumping jacks/run in place, etc.)

**PICKY PIANO:** We sing the song, but the pianist drops out at random and the kids have to keep singing.

**PING PONG:** Left-hand side of the room sing to the right-hand side of the room, who does the actions as they listen, then the right-hand side sings it back to the left-hand side of the room, who does the actions as they listen.

**POPCORN:** You point to a child and they stand and sing the first word of the phrase, then each new child or class you point to sings the next word of the phrase

**SING-A-SMILE:** Sing it with different emotions (happy, sad, excited, giggling, etc.)

**SING-A-ZOO:** Sing it in different animal voices (squeaky mouse voice, cow voice, sheep voice)

**SOUND EFFECTS:** I pass out cards with a word and a sound effect on each card. The Primary sings the song, but when we get to one of the words on the cards, all of the children holding that card make the sound effect instead of singing the word. In Jr., we sing the word, then the pianist pauses for the sound effect. (Example: *My Heavenly Father Loves Me*)

Bird – Pause and they all tweet like birds

Sky – Sigh

Rain – Make a thunderstorm by rubbing hands together, tapping on chairs, etc.

Wind – Whoosh like the wind as you spin around

Rose – Sniff

Walk – Stomp on ground

World – Say, “It’s awesome!”

Me – Say, “Thank you!”

**STICK PUPPETS:** Use stick puppets to cue the children. There are some great images posted online for *The Shepherd’s Carol* and for *The Wise Man & the Foolish Man*.

**THE LAST WORD:** They sing the last word of each phrase loudly (Example: *Children All Over the World – day, pray, way, etc.*; or *As a Child of God – sing loudly the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the phrase represented by the pictures*)

**VOLLEYBALL:** One half of the room sings a line and does the actions, the other half of the room sings the next line in the song with the actions

**WATERFALL:** You sing a line or phrase and then point to a class and that class turns and sings it to the next class, who does the same until the phrase has made it to the back of the room.

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Alternatively, you can sing the first line, the next class continues the song with the 2<sup>nd</sup> line, the following class sings the 3<sup>rd</sup> line, and so forth.

Good luck! I'm sure the Spirit will inspire you with lots of great ideas!