

Teaching Rhythmic Movement to Children



“Chock-Let Pie”

by *Peter A. Hastie,
Ellen H. Martin, and
Gary S. Gibson*

It is doubtful that any teacher would question the value of rhythmic movement in a physical education program. The benefits of being able to move rhythmically and to keep a beat are numerous. First, children with rhythm have an increased kinesthetic awareness of their body in motion and stillness. As most physical activities have an inherent rhythm (e.g., tennis, swimming, running, or basketball), participation in lessons that focus on rhythm help sharpen kinesthetic awareness of the body in space as well as the length of time required to perform the individual components of a movement or skill. For example, you may hear a tennis instructor talk about keeping the serve motion smooth by maintaining fluidity between the ball toss and the swing. Second, rhythmic activities can also help to develop coordination, balance, and endurance. These components underlie many complex and simple skills. Yet, even in a straightforward skill like skipping, some children have difficulty coordinating the step-hop pattern required to successfully demonstrate the skill. This lack of coordination is often reflected by choppy or disjointed movements. Finally, moving to percussion, music, or choreographed patterns helps children develop multisensory integration. This is evidenced by the need for sight, hearing, and kinesthetic awareness as the child moves the body in space.

Elementary physical education teachers understand the importance of helping children develop fundamental motor skills because they are the basis for success in many physical activities. Yet helping students develop rhythm is just as important since every activity has an underlying rhythmical component. Thus, this article takes you through a series of progressions that help teach movement and rhythm to children. These are designed to strengthen your children's self-confidence (as well as your own!) and to implement a system that

is easy to use so that all children will have opportunity to glean some positive benefits.

A Four Stage Progression

We can teach children rhythmic movement skills by following a four-stage progression. As children progress through these stages, their competency level should improve allowing the design of simple routines while accurately moving to an external beat:

Stage 1: Learning how to “verbalize” a rhythm.

Stage 2: Learning to use a set of symbols to record and “read” a rhythm.

Stage 3: Learning to move to a rhythm.

Stage 4: Creating movement sequences that fit a rhythm.

Stage 1: Verbalizing a Rhythm

We help children become aware of rhythms by verbalizing them. The “Chock-Let Pie” technique is a useful way to teach children this skill. We begin by using words to symbolize one beat or a group of beats in a measure (i.e., a specified number of musical beats). For our purposes we are using a four beat count for each measure, thus if you said 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, this would denote two measures. The word for a single beat (quarter note) is PIE. To count 4 beats, you would say, PIE - PIE - PIE - PIE. It is the mental picture of a pie that children connect to that makes the “Chock-let” pie strategy unique. Instead of thinking in abstract musical terms or notations, the children easily visualize a pie cut into four pieces with each piece representing one beat (see Figure 1).

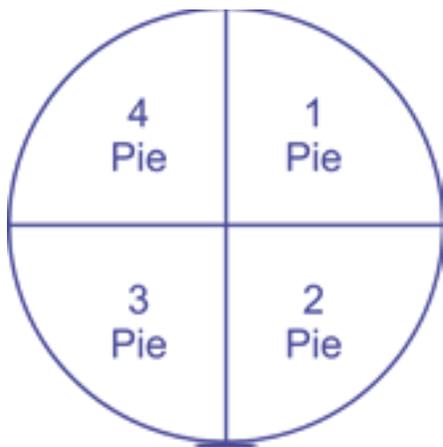


FIGURE 1 Four beat count—each pie section represents a single beat.

If you wish to introduce verbalizing half of a single beat (eighth notes), exchange the word chocolate for pie. Upon pronunciation, break the word chocolate into two syllables (Chock-Let). The time it takes to say Chock-Let is the same time it takes to say pie. Hence for a 4-count beat (1-2-3-4) with two eighth-counts (half of a single beat) written on the third beat, you would say, "PIE - PIE - CHOCKLET - PIE." The mental picture visualized by the students is of a pie sliced into four with one of the original four slices divided in half (see Figure 2).

In some rhythms, you may wish to indicate that one beat in a measure is silent. This moment of silence is called a rest and may be assigned various lengths of time such as single beat/quarter, half of a beat/eighth, one-fourth of a beat/sixteenth, and so on. For example, when using a four beat count (1, 2, 3, 4) and a rest occurs for one beat (quarter), you say "Shh" (same length of time as PIE). In this instance "shh" is used to indicate not only the missing beat, but also the length of the missing beat (one beat or quarter). Therefore, if a rest occurs on the third beat in a measure, the verbalized rhythm sequence is "pie, pie, shh, pie" (see Figure 3). If you were clapping your hands to this rhythm, you would hear "clap, clap, (silence), clap."

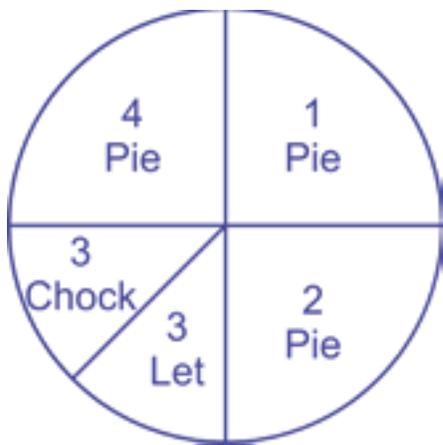


FIGURE 2 A four beat count with a half of one beat (eighth note) on the third beat.

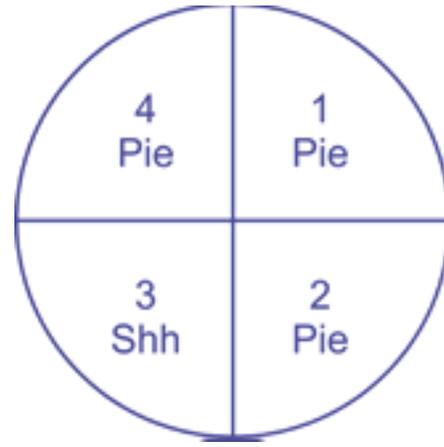


FIGURE 3 A four beat count with a full rest (one beat) or a quarter rest on the third beat.

We use the word UGH to verbalize an eighth rest (half of a beat) when using a four beat count (1, 2, 3, 4). Thus, UGH only uses half of one beat and takes half the time to verbalize as "Shh." A good example of the eighth rest is indicated when the eighth rest takes the place of either the first or second syllable of CHOCK - LET. If the eighth rest falls on the first syllable, it would be "UGH - LET" or if the eighth rest falls on the second syllable, it would be "CHOCK - UGH" (see Figure 4). Remember "PIE - PIE - CHOCKLET - PIE"? With an eighth rest, the four count could appear as follows: "PIE - PIE - UGHLET - PIE." Another example of a half rest could be "PIE - UGHUGH - CHOCKLET - PIE."

Once your children master verbalizing full (1,2,3,4) counts with beats and rests representing various lengths of time, you may want to teach them to verbalize more challenging rhythms that consist of beats whose length of time is much longer or shorter than one beat. "Huckleberry" is the word used to verbalize a quarter of one beat (sixteenth note) in a four beat count. "Huckleberry" would be pronounced quickly using all four syllables in the same time length you would say "PIE" (i.e., HUCK - LE - BER - RY). Thus, a rhythm whose value is a quarter of one beat (sixteenth note) on

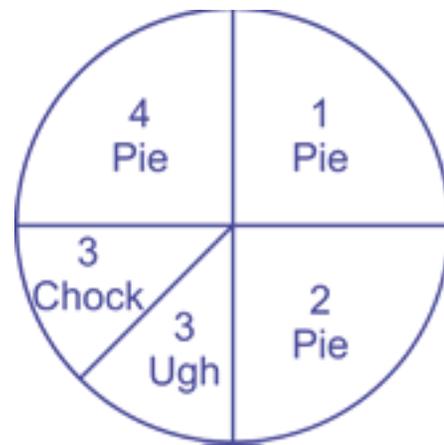


FIGURE 4 A four beat count with an eighth rest (half of one beat) on the third beat.

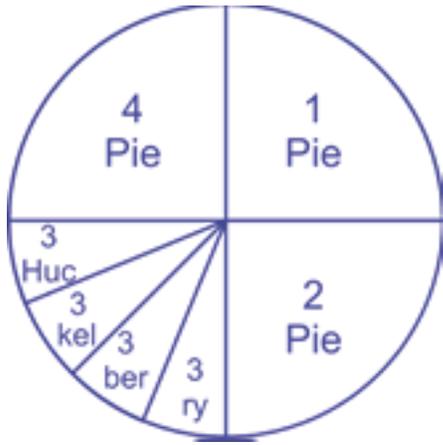


FIGURE 5 A four beat count with one beat valued as a sixteenth note on the third beat.

the third beat of the measure would be verbalized as "PIE - PIE - HUCKLEBERRY - PIE" (see Figure 5).

Stage 2. Learning Symbols and Reading Rhythms

Once your children can verbalize rhythms, you can teach them a system of notation that allows them to write down and read back rhythms. Table 1 correlates to the count value, the verbalizations, and the rhythm notation. The symbol shown is reflective of what one would see in actual music notation.

Practice learning this notation by writing the notation for the following 4-count rhythm verbalizations:

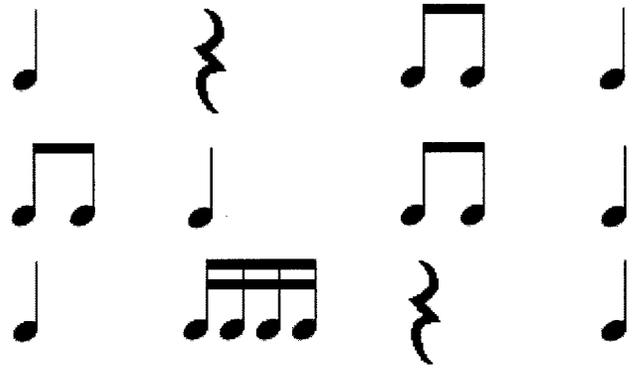
pie, shh, shh, pie

pie, Chock-Let, shh, pie

choc-ugh, pie, pie, huckleberry

Table 1		
Count/Note	Word	Notation
Single count / quarter note	PIE	
Half count / eighth note	CHOCK- LET	
Quarter count / sixteenth note	HUCK - LE - BER - RY	
Single rest / quarter note	SHH	
Half rest / eighth note	UGH	

Now, verbalize the rhythm for the following notations:



In the same fashion, have your children practice writing down rhythm verbalizations as notations and reading back notations as rhythm verbalizations. It is useful to have children pair up into partners for this activity so that they can check that their written notes match the verbalizations and vice versa. Once children have mastered these translations (from words to notes, and notes to words), you can play a rhythm using some percussion instrument and have children either describe the words or write the notes.

Stage 3. Moving To Rhythms

Once your children have mastered the stage 1 and 2 skills, they are ready to start moving to rhythms. It is easiest for children to begin moving to rhythms by stepping in place, rather than by performing locomotor movements. For example, the rhythm "Pie, Pie, Chock-Let, Pie" can be performed as the stepping sequence "step, step, step/step, step" (where step/step means two quick steps per count).

Once your children can perform a rhythm by stepping in place, you can add in various locomotor skills. As before, keep things simple by having a single locomotor movement equal a count of one. Walking, leaping, hopping, stomping, and sliding are examples of "one-count movements." For example, a locomotor sequence for the verbalized rhythm "Pie, Pie, Chock-Let, Pie" might be performed as "slide, slide, step/step, slide." Again, since you are initially limiting locomotor movements to counts of one, the rhythm verbalization "Chock-Let"—representing two counts for one beat—is performed as two quick steps in place rather than two quick slides.

When children are proficient at performing simple locomotor movements to verbalized rhythms, you can add in choreographic elements such as "shh" notes or accents (the stressed beat in a count or measure) to increase the originality of rhythmic motion sequences. Shh notes are very useful for adding in nonlocomotor expressive movements. The simplest nonlocomotor actions are gestures or changes of levels. Hence, the

verbalization, "pie, pie, Chock-Let, shh" may be enacted "step forward, step back, side-slide/side-slide, sink."

When we reach the stage of moving to these words, children usually find it easier if the rest is in the second half of a beat and if a movement (versus a second rest) follows it. It is feasible, however, to begin counts with rests and to have a rest following a rest. It is at this point that you let children take the level of sophistication that suits their skill.

Another choreographic element is an accent which is a stressed beat in a measure. When applied to rhythmic motion, an accent increases the force of a movement, such as applying an extra-heavy step versus a light step, or it may be a marked gesture. In the system of rhythm notation, an accent is designated by the symbol ▼ placed above the symbol (notation) that is to be accented. For example,

in the notation sequence:				
which is pronounced:	pie	pie	Chock-Let	pie
or shown as:	step	step	step/step	stomp

You would verbally emphasize the notation at the fourth beat and emphasize a body movement occurring at that beat, too. Accents can occur anywhere in a measure, above quarter notes, eighth notes, sixteenth notes, or rests.

Stage 4. Creating Movement Sequences

Complex levels of rhythmic movement involves children moving in relationship to one another. Initially, you might divide your children into small groups arranged in straight lines, squares, or partners. For example, a group of four children may start in two lines facing each other, then move away from each other during a four count beat, and then back to their original place on the second count of four.

After your children are proficient at creating 8 to 16 count sequences, notating the rhythms, verbalizing the rhythm, and then adding movement to the counts, they can begin to build group sequences where different students in the group are presenting different rhythms and hence different parts. These can be first attempted with four groups of four, each with its own separate 16 count. One group might move to a "Pie Shh Shh Shh" sequence at the back of the group, with a heavy and dramatic focus on the first pie. On both sides, two groups may be performing the same sequence of "Pie Pie Chock-Let Pie," while in the front, another group at a lower level is doing a more complex routine of "Shh Chock-Let Choc-Ugh Pie." In this way, a whole expressive dance is developed where the coordination of the groups is set by the underlying beat. Additionally, African-American Stepping could be introduced at this point as an intercul-

tural curriculum activity that directly relates to rhythmic movement.

When children are working in this final stage, any number of props can be used to highlight certain actions. Props include boxes, benches, chairs, or ribbons. Sometimes students find holding props and striking them together can be helpful in keeping them in time. Examples of such percussive props include two drink cans that can be hit together or two rolled up magazines that can be struck together or against the floor.

This progression uses the concept of scaffolding that builds upon what is known to create or learn something new. Thus, once children can verbalize the rhythm, then they can read and understand notation. Copies of the notation could be taken home by the students and used to acquire more individual practice time or the writing of new rhythmic movements. Building on that, children learn simple movements to the rhythm before creating their own rhythmical sequences. By using this simple progression, you can start establishing the rhythmical foundation that is needed to perform many motor skill movement forms. ©

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