

Hi, this is Ross from Learning without Borders and today we're going to learn about nursery rhymes.

I'm sure you know a lot of nursery rhymes, everybody does. They appear in nearly every culture and are often some of the first things we memorise. I'm sure you don't remember learning many nursery rhymes – you've just always known them. You might even know a few in English, like *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, or *Baa Baa Black Sheep*. We usually learn these songs as children, and so we think of them as being very innocent and simple, in a word, "childlike". But did you know that many English nursery rhymes have rather darker origins?

Take, for example, the popular rhyme "Ring-a-ring-a-roses". The song is accompanied by a dance, in which children join hands and move in a circle singing "Ring-a-ring-a-roses/a pocket full of posies/a-tissue, a-tissue/we all fall down", at which point the children generally fall to the floor laughing. In reality, however, the song is no laughing matter. Let's start with the first line, "ring-a-roses"; simple enough, right? The song's about a ring of red flowers. Well, not quite. The song is actually about the Bubonic Plague, also known as the Black Death: a disease that killed around half of the population of Europe in over just four years in the 1300s. One of the first signs of the plague was the appearance of itchy red rings on the skin. Like rings of roses.

So what about the second line? A posie *is* actually a bunch of flowers. At this time, people believed that diseases were caused by exposure to bad smells and, what with everybody dying along with generally awful standards of hygiene, there were a lot of bad smells around. To try and keep themselves safe, then, people would carry posies of flowers in their pockets which they could hold to their noses whenever they smelled something bad. This, of course, had no effect whatsoever.

As for the final two lines, the first is simple. A tissue is the piece of paper you sneeze into, and it also sounds like the noise you make when you sneeze: "a-choo!" Sneezing was another sign of the plague which came after the rings appeared, meaning you were closer to death. Then, in the final line, the disease reaches its final stage: death. The line "we all fall down" is another way of saying "we all die".

So there you have it... What a delightful little rhyme to teach your children! Check out my other podcasts to find out the dark truth behind some other popular nursery rhymes.