

“Baby Rattlesnake’s First Rattle”

A Pawnee Tale

In Margaret Read MacDonald, Shake-It-Up Tales! Stories to Sing, Dance, Drum, and Act Out (Ch. 11, Act-It-Out Tales), 161-165. August House, 2000.

Adapted with permission from Baby Rattlesnake, picture book by Lynn Moroney (San Francisco: Children’s Book Press, 1989); told by Te Ata, Chickasaw teller who probably learned it from a Pawnee singer “with whom Te Ata toured Chautauqua’s in the 1920s.” (p.165). This version was developed by MacDonald and Wajuppa Tossa “as a teaching tale for students in northeastern Thailand”, and was published there in 1997 (Storytelling as a Means of Preservation of Language and Culture and in the Process of Teaching and Learning, Maharakham University, 84-88).

Also found in Frances Densmore’s Pawnee Music as “Story of the Little Rattlesnake” (pp.107-108). Densmore notes that Mrs. Effie Blain sang the story in its entirety with a repeated tune (Densmore transcribed the melody, but not the text, which is in English translation only; in this version, the little rattlesnake’s head is stomped on by the Pawnee girl, and his elder brother sadly says I told you so). New York: Da Capo Press, 1972; reprint of Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 93, 1929.

Baby Rattlesnake was sooo little.

He was sooo little he didn’t even have a rattle yet.

Baby Rattlesnake wanted a *rattle*.

He went to Momma Rattlesnake.

“Momma! Momma! I want a rattle!

Give me a rattle!”

“No, Baby Rattlesnake.

You are too little.

You would get into trouble with a rattle.”

He went to Poppa Rattlesnake.

“Poppa! Poppa! I want a rattle!

Give me a rattle!”

“No, Baby Rattlesnake.

You are too little.

You would get into trouble with a rattle.”

Baby Rattlesnake went to Grandma Rattlesnake.

“Grandma! Grandma! I want a rattle!

Please give me a rattle!”

“Baby Rattlesnake, you are too little.

You would just get into trouble.”

Baby Rattlesnake went to Grandpa Rattlesnake.

“Grandpa! Grandpa! I want a rattle!

Please please! Give me a rattle!”

“No, Baby Rattlesnake.

You are too little.

You would get into trouble with a rattle.”

But Baby Rattlesnake would not quit.

“*Please* Grandpa!

Please!

I am *really* big now.

Let me have my own rattle.”

People got tired of hearing him whine.

Finally the elders said,

“Go ahead and give him a rattle.

He will just get into trouble.

But he will learn.”

Baby Rattlesnake was *so* happy with his new rattle.

He sang a Rattlesnake Song.

“chhh..chhhh..chhh

chhh...chhhh...chhh”

He did a Rattlesnake Dance.

“chh...chh...chh...chh...

chh...chh...chh...chh...”

He was playing all over the place with his new rattle.

“chhhhh...chhhhh...

chhhhh...chhhhh...”

Then Baby Rattlesnake had an idea.

“I can *scare* somebody with my rattle!”

There was Jack Rabbit hopping down the road.

Baby Rattlesnake hid behind the rock.

He waited. He waited. He kept real still.

Hop...hop... hop... hop...

“*Chhhhhhhhh!*”

That Baby Rattlesnake *jumped* out rattling.

“*Help!*” Jack Rabbit jumped *so* high!

Baby Rattlesnake *laughed*.

“That was a good joke!

Who else can I scare?”

Here came Old Man Turtle.

“Oh boy! I can scare him too!”

Baby Rattlesnake hid behind his rock.

Old Man Turtle came down the road.

So slow.

“One foot.

One foot.

One foot.

One foot.”

Baby Rattlesnake waited.

He kept real still.

“One foot.

One foot.

One foot...”

“*Chhhhhhhhh!*”

“*Help!*”

Old Man Turtle jumped *so* high in the air.

Baby Rattlesnake *laughed* and *laughed*.

“That was a good joke I played on Old Man Turtle.

Who else can I scare?”

There was the Chief's Daughter coming down the road.

She walked so tall.

She held her head high in the air.

“I can scare the Chief's Daughter!”

Baby Rattlesnake hid behind his rock.

He waited.

He kept real still.

The Chief's Daughter came down the road.

Step and step.

Step and step.

The Chief's Daughter was proud.

The Chief's Daughter was brave.

She was not afraid of *anything*.

Step and step.

Step and ...

"Chhhhhhhh!"

That Chief's Daughter whirled.

"Ho!"

That chief's Daughter brought her foot down *hard*

On Baby Rattlesnake's new rattle!

"Ha!"

That Chief's Daughter ground his rattle into the path.

Step and step.

Step and step.

That Chief's Daughter walked on down the path.

“oooooooohhhhh...”

Poor Baby Rattlesnake crawled home.

Momma saw his broken rattle.

“He was too young.”

Poppa saw his broken rattle.

“He was too young.”

Grandma saw his broken rattle.

“He was too young to have a rattle.”

Grandpa saw his broken rattle.

“So did you learn something, Baby Rattlesnake?

Now don't ask for a rattle again.

Not until you are old enough to know how to behave!”

And Baby Rattlesnake did not.

Notes from MacDonald: "After the story I retell the tale, and we act it out. At the end of that story session, I pass out envelopes and we make rattling rattlesnakes to take home."

Instructions:

1. Put a few grains of popcorn into an 8 1/2" envelope. Seal the envelope.
 2. Fold the envelope in half lengthwise. Shake the grains into one end.
 3. Fold over the "tail" of the envelope, being careful to shake all of the grains into the "tail."
 4. Staple the "tail" at the fold. This secures the grains within the folded over "tail".
 5. Draw snake stripes on the envelope, and add stick-on dots for eyes.
 6. Shake your rattlesnake.
- (pp.164-165)

Densmore transcribed the tune in varying 8th-note time, with 4 sharps in the key signature. The range is from middle-C# to the G# above (in Western terms, it's in c# minor, but it's really more pentatonic). For me the phrasing is easier to hear/see without the time signatures or measure divisions.

1 5 5 5 5 5 5 4 3 4 3 1 1 4 4 4 4 3 3 4 3 1 1 4 3 1 1 1 1 1 1 :||

I made up the following words to fit the tune and use as a refrain in the story:

You're too little for a rattle, Baby Rattlesnake
You'll only get in trouble, O Little One
No, you can't have it—
Don't ask me! (Mother) Be quiet! (Father) Be happy! (Grandmother)

The Grandfather does not sing the song, since I've chosen to introduce him as a revered, dignified man who no longer needs songs to get his point across (and who is also thereby treating Baby Rattlesnake more seriously; he's the only one in my version to explain *why* Baby Rattlesnake is too young for a rattle).

Baby Rattlesnake's version, when he has the rattle:

Oh now I have my rattle, won't you look at me!
I'll do such great things with it, oh, wait and see!
I love my rattle!
I love it!