

Rhythm of the Rocks / Obwisana

This is a wonderful chant from Ghana which I used as a chorus, adding lyrics and verses to expand the song. You can just use the chorus (chant) as the traditional rock passing game (instructions on the next page), or keep a steady beat with your hands.

My best friend, Marylee Sunseri and I recorded it on our 1994 recording, "Rhythm of the Rocks", and it remains a favorite song of teachers, librarians, and of course, children of all ages! (The recording won an ALA Notable Recording Award and Parent's Choice- you can find it in the shop on my website). The illustration on the next page are from our songbook of same title. Since recording it, I've written 2 additional verses which are included here.



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Listen to the rhythm of the rocks
What would they say if they could talk
So many years down under the ground
Listen to the sound, listen to the sound

CHORUS: Obwisana, sa-na, obwisana, sa
Obwisana, sa-na, obwisana, sa

Rocks in your pockets and rocks in your hands
Rocks from the water and rocks from the land
Rocks that have traveled many a mile
Rocks making music, making us smile (chorus)

Find me a rock that's smooth and round
Find me a rock down under the ground
Find me a rock that I can pound
Listen to the sound, listen to the sound (chorus)

Rocks that the ocean brings to the land
Smoother by the sea and smooth in your hand
Rocks making rhythm for all to hear
Rocks making music far and near (chorus)

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(DETAILED INSTRUCTIONS FOR PLAYING THE GAME ARE ON THE NEXT PAGE)

Whenever I introduce a new instrument, I do the following to get the children focused on the sound the instrument makes, and keeping a rhythm together as a group. It is especially useful to do this with the rocks, since they are not typically thought of as an instrument.

Before you play the rocks:

1. Talk about the rocks before you pass them out (where they came from, colors, etc.)
2. Give the children a signal to freeze, so you can easily get their attention after you begin playing.
3. Give each child 2 rocks, and then spend a minute talking about how they feel. If you are using river or ocean rocks, which work best for this song, they will be smooth and “soft.” They may be cold. I bring rocks in from my car, and the children are always amazed at how cold they are. We talk about how their hands will warm them up. Then I tell them how in the olden days, people often put large rocks near the fire, and then in the bottom of their beds under the blankets to keep them warm.

Playing the rocks:

1. Begin by counting out loud and playing the rocks as you count. Count only to four repeatedly.
2. When your group has mastered that, have them count silently in their heads, and play the rocks together.
3. Then sing a song the children are very familiar with. I use Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. Have them sing and play their rocks, playing each syllable you sing.
4. When they have mastered that, have them play Twinkle, Twinkle, while singing silently in their heads. I have found most three-year-olds can do this, which always astounds me!
5. Now you are ready to teach the children the song, Obwisana. Sing the song while keeping a steady rhythm with the rocks.

Playing the rock passing game:

Begin with children sitting cross-legged and in a line. Have a pile of rocks next to the child on the left. Explain that you will all be passing your rocks to the friend on the right. I have each child tell me who is on their right before we begin. I have found with some groups, it helps to have each child place a hand on the shoulder of the child on the right. Making the physical connection seems to help them understand and remember which direction they will be passing to. It’s helpful to use the following song to teach the children how to pass the rocks keeping the same rhythm as a group:

Sing to the tune of “Paw Paw Patch” :

Pick up your rocks and give them away, pick up your rocks and give them away
Pick up your rocks and give them away, pick up your rocks and give them away
Pick up your rocks and give them away.

The last child on the right can place his or her rocks in a basket. You will need to have lots of extra rocks for the line version of the song. Now you can try singing Obwisana as you pass the rocks. If that goes well, move the children into a circle, and again, have each child say who is on his or her right, and who the rocks will be passed to.

If you teach this song slowly, most children will learn how to pass in a circle without becoming frustrated. If they do begin to get frustrated, stop, and try again another day, or just use the rocks for the simple activities above.

Obwisana— A Rock Passing Game

Ghana is on the west coast of Africa just below the Sahara Desert and above the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean. It is a grassy land where people farm and hunt. Games of cooperation help children to prepare for their lives as members of their tribe. “Obwisana” is a stone passing game. It means, “Oh, Grandma, I hurt my finger on a rock.”

The game:

- ◆ Sit in a close circle (cross legged with knees touching).
- ◆ Place a rock in front of each child.
- ◆ Rocks are picked up simultaneously by each child and placed in front of the person on his or her left in a rhythmic motion while chanting “Obwisana.”

Ideas:

- ◆ If no rocks are handy, pass any small object that everyone has...a shoe...a crumpled piece of paper...a penny...a lego piece...
- ◆ Pantomime the picking and placing motion to learn the rhythm of the game.
- ◆ Speed up the tempo when everyone’s an expert!

With very young children:

- ◆ The teacher can keep all the rocks and pass one at a time around the circle. As the last person in the circle (sitting next to the teacher) receives the rocks, he/she can place them in a container. When all the rocks have been passed and placed in the container, the game is over.

