

Singing lullabies soothes stress in parents

What if every family could create an original lullaby?





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Sometimes, inspiration is born of a great question. Jesse was discussing parenthood with his friend, a soon-to-be father, when he asked: “What is your lullaby about?” His friend was confused, and it took Jesse a moment to realise why.

As a new father, Jesse participated in Carnegie Hall’s Lullaby Project, which pairs new and expecting parents with an artist to write a personal lullaby for their baby. For Jesse, writing a lullaby to welcome his baby into the world had come to seem as inevitable as buying diapers, so he’d forgotten that people who hadn’t participated in the project didn’t do it.

Jesse’s question inspired us to reimagine the possibilities of the Lullaby Project. We began to ask more questions: Why couldn’t Jesse’s premise become true? Is scaling the Lullaby Project possible? What impact could this have on parents’ wellbeing? This article invites you into those questions as we investigate how to balance the delicacy of this project with the desire to make it accessible to all.

Singing to soothe stress

The Lullaby Project began at Jacobi Medical Center, a public hospital in the Bronx in New York City. Medical staff had observed that high stress levels among young parents often led to challenges for bonding with their infants. We wondered how music could help.

People have been singing songs to their children for as long as humankind has existed. Across all cultures, we sing songs to encourage sleep, to soothe our babies and ourselves. Scientific evidence

shows that it works: infant-directed singing can improve caregiver wellbeing, calm distressed infants, and enhance post-natal bonding (Sharman et al., 2023).

What might happen if pregnant women could step into a creative space where they could reflect on and express their hopes for their children in the form of personal lyrics and melodies? How might a highly personal lullaby, connected to a family's experience, culture and story, support young families?

“Infant-directed singing can improve caregiver wellbeing, calm distressed infants, and enhance post-natal bonding.”

We designed a pilot project to guide parents to write a personal lullaby for their child, and create a simple recording of that song. The response was enthusiastic. Soon the Lullaby Project spread to a dozen sites in New York City. At Carnegie Hall, the city's famous concert venue, we began an annual event with sessions on lullaby writing and composing methodologies, and strategies for building projects in different contexts and settings.

Gradually, through partnerships with more than 60 organisations, Lullaby spread around the world – from Chile to South Korea, from Cyprus to Australia. The annual event at Carnegie Hall now features professional arrangements and recordings of selected songs written in these diverse Lullaby projects.

Jesse's question made us wonder if we could go even further. But before we come back to the question of scale, another question: what evidence do we have on the impact of Lullaby?

Measuring impact on parents' wellbeing

At the annual event at Carnegie Hall, researchers discuss ways to measure the impact of our work on two generations – parents and children – and the connection between them.

Early qualitative evaluation has found compelling outcomes on parents' and other caregivers' wellbeing. When parents describe their experiences participating in Lullaby versus their daily lives, we see marked differences in five areas: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. These five areas comprise the PERMA™ framework for measuring wellbeing (University of Pennsylvania School of Arts and Sciences, 2023).

Parents told us that their experiences made them more confident about their capacity to parent well, and particularly to feel creative in their parenting. We also found that lullabies can help strengthen other important relationships: sharing their songs with family and friends can serve as a way to connect new parents with loved ones near and far.

In the Welsh town of Neath, a health visitor working with our UK partner's team observed:

“It's particularly beneficial in cases where we see that a family is at risk of becoming isolated ... We see real positive changes in confidence for parents and children taking part in these music sessions.”
(Davies, 2023)

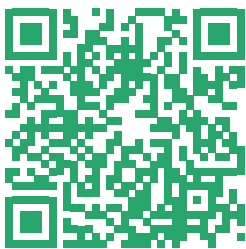
Numerous lullaby writers voiced a sense of accomplishment and pride: they did not think they could write a song, but found new confidence with support from their artist partner. As one mother, Alexis, put it when introducing her *Song for Nico* at the [2022 Lullaby concert](#):

“Writing my lullaby ended up being a turning point in my pregnancy. I had spent the entire time feeling ill, anxious and depressed ... This process allowed me to find the words to share with Nico, but even more so with myself, a deep trust in the journey of parenthood, of growing, and of creating.”
(Carnegie Hall, 2022)

I believe there is another, perhaps less measurable, reason why this project is so powerful. Throughout the ages, lullabies have planted seeds of identity and lineage. These simple songs ultimately become vessels for families to carry with them across geography and time, an expression of love and joy



↑ Father and daughter participating in the Lullaby Project concert



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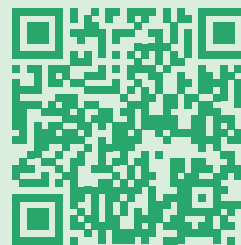
that can accompany parents through places where these qualities are scarce, providing comfort and a sense of home.

Many parents who participated in the project seem instinctively to sense this, too. They express gratitude that, through the song, a child will always know how loved she is, even beyond her parent’s life. Parents share the hope that their lullaby will be passed from one generation to the next, becoming a family heirloom.

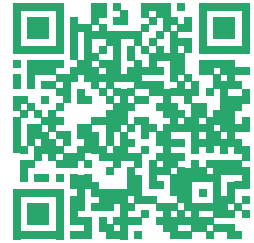
Here you can listen to original lullabies written by parents from around the world



← Scan the QR code to listen to [Lullaby Project music stream](#)



← Scan the QR code to listen to [Hopes and Dreams: The Lullaby Project](#)



↑ Scan the QR code to see the impact of the [Lullaby Project on caregivers](#)

Our strategy for scale

As Jesse's question makes clear, the impact on Lullaby participants can be so profound that they forget it isn't universal. So how can we scale the project so that more families experience that impact?

A word about "scale": we want to reclaim the notion of scale from the business context. This is not scale for the sake of numbers or revenue. This is about scaling-up a movement for tenderness, care, beauty and love. Most scaled interventions work hard to provide a standardised experience to a large number of participants. But with Lullaby we are working to scale the opportunity for a rich, personalised, individual experience.

In New Zealand, for example, we set out to integrate Māori cultural practices. As one teen mother who participated in the project put it, "For me, the option to have my song in te reo Māori felt like home."

First, we plan to explore how a Lullaby tech platform could increase access for parents and artists, centralise resources, and improve efficiency. The platform could connect lullaby artists to families; streamline administrative components of the programme, such as song-rights management;

facilitate monitoring and evaluation; and allow for the recording and sharing of families' songs.

New partnerships with entities that support families will also be integral to scale. We envision these partners to include regional and national NGOs and health systems, as well as major corporations who could provide the Lullaby experience as a wellness benefit to employees.

"Anyone has the ability to create and sing a lullaby, as humans have done for centuries."

For scale solutions to work, we are continuing to experiment with Lullaby methodology. We are exploring the efficacy of group lullaby writing, for example, followed by the opportunity to create a personal song with or without a facilitator. Our lead Australian partner is also experimenting with creating a library of lullaby music templates, to which personalised lyrics could be added.

Could such approaches increase efficiency while preserving the powerful impact on wellbeing we've seen in the current model?

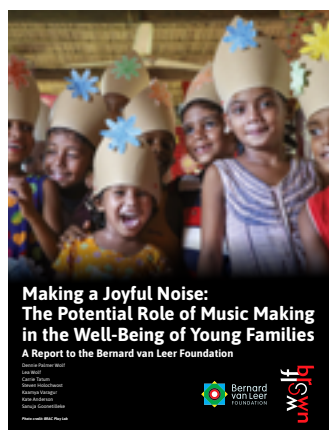
At Carnegie Hall we believe in the superpowers of artists. We also know that anyone has the ability to create and sing a lullaby, as humans have done for centuries. But who can facilitate lullaby writing, in the context of our efforts to scale? Which artistic and human skills are most essential to draw out and support the writing of lullabies? Who, besides professional teaching artists, can we work with to bring the Lullaby Project to families most in need? Midwives and doulas? Social workers and nurses? Those offering support in refugee camps? Such people already have overwhelming responsibilities, so it's a big ask to add this to their portfolio. However, the positive impact could extend to them: a beautiful feature of Lullaby is the ripple effect of joy and connection that radiates from the writing process and influences everyone involved, including the facilitator.

Might a simple set of video resources, for example, enable community health workers to support lullaby writing in a way that maintains its impact? We intend to explore this exciting possibility with a partner in India that is working with tens of thousands of families.

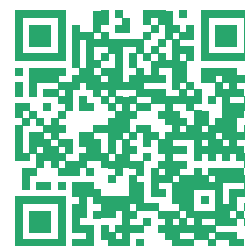
The final piece in our scale strategy is to bring together a diverse network of stakeholders, including celebrity artists, to showcase the power of

personalised lullabies to support parent and child wellbeing. This movement would share information about the realities that parents in high-stress environments face, spur catalytic events like "World Lullaby Day" to build public awareness, and create a roadmap to achieve a targeted set of related policy goals.

We imagine a future world in which many more parents understand how powerful it can be to create and sing personal songs to their children, and we have collectively created many more supports for them to do so. Then nobody will be confused when a friend asks them: "What is your lullaby about?"



Report: WolfBrown and Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2020



↑ Scan this QR code to [learn more](#) about the potential role of music making in the wellbeing of young families.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-17

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