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# Promoting the well-being of infants and caregivers through music: insights from the lullaby project's international convening

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## ABSTRACT

Carnegie Hall's Lullaby Project seeks to harness the power of music and lullabies to enhance perinatal care, strengthen family bonds, and foster individual and community well-being. In 2024, its annual Lullaby Convening brought together an international community of musicians, healthcare professionals, researchers, and community partners to explore how the Lullaby Project supports health, social equity, and vulnerable populations through the universality of lullabies. This practice-based report provides a synthesis of personal testimonies, interdisciplinary research findings, and community-driven insights. Findings emphasized the need for more impact-based research, using a range of approaches, along with innovative pathways for the project's expansion to ensure sustained relevance across diverse cultural contexts worldwide.

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Lullaby; perinatal care; social equity; health; wellbeing

## Introduction

Since its founding in 2011, Carnegie Hall's Lullaby Project, herein referred to as "the Project", has served as an evidence-informed, low-cost, safe, and scalable approach to supporting the health and well-being of infants and their caregivers. The Project pairs families with teaching artist musicians to create, sing, and record personal lullabies, "supporting maternal health, aiding child development, and strengthening the bond between parent and child" (Hinesley et al., 2020, p. 544). Seeking to work with communities most impacted by inequity and injustice, the Project has nurtured partnerships in the public health sector, public education system, correctional system, and in settings with people experiencing homelessness (Johnson, 2024). To date, the Project has helped create approximately 5,000 lullabies with over 7,000 participants in over 40 languages, with over 50 Lullaby Partners across the U.S., Canada, Chile, Colombia, Peru, UK, France, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, Greece, Israel, Kenya, South Korea, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand, bringing lullaby to contexts as varied as refugee camps, health-care settings, schools, universities, and correctional facilities (Johnson, 2024).<sup>1</sup>

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The Project draws on identified benefits of the culturally universal practice of infant-directed singing (Huron, 2001; Mehr et al., 2019), which has been shown to strengthen caregiver-child connections (Trehub & Trainor, 1999). Singing calms and engages infants (Trehub, 2001), captures their attention (Nakata & Trehub, 2004, Trehub et al., 2016), modulates their arousal (Cirelli & Trehub, 2020; Cirelli et al., 2020; Corbeil et al., 2016; Nakata & Trehub, 2004), and reduces distress (Cirelli & Trehub, 2020; Trehub et al., 2015). Caregiver well-being is supported by increasing their perceived emotional connection to their infants (Fancourt & Perkins, 2018a, 2018b; Fritzon et al., 2024; Steinberg et al., 2021), regulating their own arousal levels (Cirelli et al., 2020; Fancourt & Perkins, 2018a), and reducing symptoms associated with the challenges of parenthood while boosting self-esteem (Huron, 2001; Perkins, 2024; Trehub, 2001; Wolf et al., 2024). Moreover, music therapists around the world have used lullabies to support both children and their families through illness and disability. Their work highlights the potential of lullabies to reduce procedural pain in premature infants through live singing during venipuncture (Ullsten et al., 2017); to foster bonding in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) by incorporating “culturally based, parent-selected, personalized” songs to help parents manage anxiety and grief (Loewy, 2015, p. 178); to help hospitalized infants regulate affect and build secure attachments (Bargiel, 2004); and to combat the negative impact the auditory environment of the NICU may have on infants’ brain maturation (Haslbeck & Bassler, 2018).

## **Program rationale, goals and approach**

The Project seeks to be responsive, adaptable, and family-/community-centered, creating a “web of shared effort and creation” and inviting caregivers and musicians to “collaborate just like mothers and babies do – trading turns and building on what each other offers” (Wolf, 2020, p. 20). Families typically work side by side with a teaching artist/facilitator on developing their personal lullaby. Oftentimes families start by using the *Lullaby Journal* provided to participants by the Project (versions are available in English, Spanish and French).<sup>2</sup> In the journal families customarily write a letter to their baby, expressing their hopes, dreams, and love for them. If families prefer not to use the journal, the prompts are used in conversation to get to know each other and to generate words, stories and phrases that could be incorporated into the lyrics of the song. Families are welcome to include any language(s) into the song that they hope to share with their child. As the lyrics are generated and the form of the song starts to develop, families explore how they might speak or sing the words, and experiment with rhythmic and melodic ideas, as well as musical styles. Once the song is developed, it is then recorded and shared with families. Guidance around each step of this creative process is given to facilitators in an *Artist Handbook*.<sup>3</sup>

This creative focus aims to immerse parents and children in environments that enrich development and communication skills via exposure to “new vocabulary, figurative language, elegant phrases, exaggeration and jokes” (Wolf, 2020, p. 13). By design, caregivers are given space to express and explore their feelings, promoting whole-family well-being and the idea that “lullabies are not just for babies,” but rather impact the child’s entire support system (Wolf, 2020, p. 20).

## Program evaluation and development

Prior Project-centered research suggests that it supports increased bonding from birth onward, though more longitudinal impact-focused research is needed to assess benefits over time (Hinesley et al., 2020; Wolf, 2020). To support the development of new Projects and the growth and evolution of existing ones, the Weill Music Institute (WMI) hosts an annual international Lullaby Convening, herein referred to as “The Convening”, to connect current and future partner organizations, teaching artists, and scholars, to share insights on program design, explore evidence and impact, and discuss ways to maximize health and well-being benefits. The 2024 Convening, held from May 30 to June 1 in Carnegie Hall’s Resnick Education Wing in New York City, featured 90 attendees from 60 different organizations, representing 12 countries and 19 U.S. states and territories. Twenty-three of the organizations were actively engaged in the Project and 37 were potential or future partners.

In this practice-based report, we provide a summary and analysis of the events of the Convening, consisting of (1) an overview of session structure, (2) a discussion of the importance and relevance of each session’s topics, and (3) a discussion of resulting calls for future work. The co-authors of this report bring backgrounds in music, neuroscience, mental health, individual and collective well-being, and significant experience running arts, social impact, and well-being programs in the U.S. and Australia. Lecamwasam and Bartleet compiled written observations of Convening sessions and undertook short interviews with  $N = 13$  participants about their experiences. These participants were selected to represent a diverse range of roles, cultural contexts, and experiences of the Project. These interviews were transcribed and analysed for key themes yielding the insights summarized in [section 6](#) below. Participants gave informed verbal consent for their insights to be used in this practice-based report, following the approved ethical clearance protocol provided by Griffith University for this research. Ortiz and Koebner brought significant practical experience with both leading and developing the Project.

## Key insights for research and practice from the convening

### *Families, culture, and equity*

Given the varied contexts where the Project occurs, including settings of inequity and injustice, facilitators must be culturally responsive, flexible, and ethically aware. Speakers and attendees highlighted the importance of bi-directional storytelling, mutual exchange, vulnerability, and sharing while acknowledging and supporting the identities, cultures, and traditions of families. Takiema Bunche Smith, the CEO and founder of Anahsa Consulting who led sessions on culture and equity, noted that, “when you start to talk to people . . . they like to share their joys and, when they get to trust you, share their pains and their hard parts, too.” This highlights the importance of addressing administrators, teaching artists, and families as equals: levelling power dynamics and elevating strengths-based approaches are critical strategies in this anti-oppressive way of working.

To further summarize Bunche Smith, culturally-responsive Projects connect participants’ cultures, languages, and life experiences with the lullaby writing process to help participants access their own ability to bond and heal through connection with their

culture, child, and creative selves. Current partners highlighted the importance of building genuine and intentional connections when discussing caregivers' hopes, wishes, and dreams, emphasizing co-creation, strengths-based approaches, and questions such as, "How can I learn from you? How can you learn from me? How can we figure this out together?" When caregivers and teaching artists faced ideological or cultural differences, teaching artists noted the importance of operating without judgement, using empathy as a "bridge", and, when possible, consulting community members with similar backgrounds when designing and implementing Projects.

It is also important to consider how Lullaby families can be engaged after their lullaby has been written. Overall, organizers and attendees highlighted the importance of administrative and creative responsiveness and the prolonged support of parental well-being and childhood development. Several methods of further engagement, including early childhood concerts and Carnegie Hall's "Big Note, Little Note" and "Well-being Concert" programs, evolved from shared desires for further musical engagement and support. These discussions led to a series of calls for further research into the practical outcomes and considerations of the Project, including the (1) role music can play in shifting power dynamics; (2) ways that music can create opportunities for growth for all members of Lullaby families; and (3) optimal methods to engage families longitudinally and measure longer-term impact.

### ***Working in a trauma-informed way***

Colleagues from the Amna Refugee Healing Network introduced ways to welcome grief and center joy as tools for healing, equipping attendees with identity- and trauma-informed strategies grounded in biological and social-cultural learning. Gabriella Brent, Director of Programmes at Amna, highlighted the importance of facilitated community- and collective-approaches, noting that, "[when you have] communities that are holding an abundance of experience, [such as] adversity, complex experience, loss, grief, and joy. . . the power of group, collective experiences is that they can really be held, especially if the facilitators can really create a container where all of that can be welcomed." Discussions focused on how expressive meaning-making tools, such as music, rhythm, sound, and storytelling, are part of existing approaches in trauma-sensitive care and how, by extension, lullabies can be incorporated into existing toolkits for healing and joy. Such integration is further supported by the structure of the Project itself, which provides relevant resources and safety nets to enhance healing benefits while allowing individual communities to incorporate additional support features as needed. For instance, the South Australian Lullaby Project team created a songbook, *Lullabies of York Peninsula*, illustrated by one of their Lullaby mothers, Ashleigh Abbott. One of the many noted impacts of this book was its contribution to honoring the legacy of a child who had passed away, with their song and name being celebrated throughout the community, in part through the inclusion of an illustrated bird whose feathers were the color the family associated with the child.

Several attendees, whom Brent included, highlighted the importance of intentionality and flexibility over focus upon targeted and constrained impact, to connect communities and empower caregivers and children alike. This, in part, involves allowing lullabies to reflect as much or as little about personal experience as the writers choose, both positive

and negative. As Brent noted, “we must remember that the psyche is a very impressive agent at taking what it needs, when it needs it . . . opening up what it’s ready for, when it’s ready, and containing or suppressing and keeping locked away when it isn’t ready or safe.” A teaching artist in attendance noted the powerful role their lullabies have played in families’ lives, to the extent that parents have played their lullaby at their child’s funeral. This artist also highlighted the intensity of the lullaby writing process for the artists, noting that these songs do not leave the artists once they are written. This, they said, is part of the power of the Project: the artists genuinely care for the families, and the resulting songs become a part of all of them as a joint legacy. Another teaching artist shared that a mother told them that, “the lullaby, ‘brings me joy when I sing it when before I couldn’t see joy in anything. It changed my life.” These stories of deep and complex impact led to calls for future practice and research development, including how to (1) ensure trauma-informed care is provided to both the families *and* the teaching artists; (2) provide training for teaching artists in trauma-informed care; (3) investigate the long-term impact of the Project on trauma; and (4) appropriately center joy in contexts of grief and loss.

### ***Building meaningful projects and songs***

Several sessions touched on the importance of building meaningful projects and songs, including a panel led by composer Thomas Cabaniss, one of the Project’s original teaching artists. Discussions focused on explorations of varied Project structures, ways to build partnerships to support young families, approaches to responsive program design, and musical tools, tips, and engagement strategies for collaborative songwriting. Insights were shared from community-partners including the New Zealand Opera Lullaby Project, the Association of Children’s Museums, and Centering Pregnancy at Alameda Health. Panelists highlighted the layers of meaning that Projects can provide to families and communities, spanning from cultural restoration and preservation to improvements in perinatal care. Awhimai Fraser and Moana Ete from the New Zealand Opera noted that many of the parents they work with hold a cultural legacy that has generally been negatively impacted by ongoing colonial pressures to assimilate, leading to “deep pain and sadness paired with pride and ownership of sovereignty.” They further noted that not every Indigenous person knows their Indigenous language, and, in fact, some parents were more fluent than the teaching artists. Such exchanges foster an environment of mutual learning and support, especially since the teaching artists belong to the community and, thus, know to meet the families where they are and to step back and allow them the freedom to take up space and tell their own story.

In parallel to this, Arthur Affleck, Executive Director of the Association of Children’s Museums, highlighted the role that Projects can play in enhancing the work of existing cultural centers. Affleck noted that institutions centered around families, such as children’s museums, focus on the human experience and the social-emotional development of children through hands-on, interactive experiences. The Lullaby framework can be leveraged to support these goals through practices, such as reflective song writing and singing, that encourage hope, belief, connection, and inspiration from birth. The work presented by Debra Roisman of Centering Pregnancy at Alameda Health, integrates health assessment with a midwife to break up medical hierarchy and uplift participants.

This work demonstrated the potential the Project holds for integration into existing prenatal and perinatal programs, providing space for participants to voice their hopes and dreams for their child. Participating mothers have stated that their lullabies are, “the best gift I can leave [the child] when I’m not here. My words will be here forever”, “no one can take [this] away from me”, and “this is the only thing connecting me with my baby, keeping me connected with my baby.” Roisman noted that such initiatives can reduce costs across the board, financially for hospitals and emotionally for families.

It is also important to address the competencies that the Project requires of teaching artists and project administrators. Teaching artists must be skilled musicians while also respecting and caring for the families they work with, thus operating with humility and the knowledge that “this is not about [them]”. At the Convening itself, several teaching artists demonstrated the power of the Project by writing a small lullaby with a single attendee in front of the crowd and splitting attendees into groups to work through the lullaby-writing steps themselves. Following the culminating performance of the songs, several participants noted the importance of such demonstrations, with one following up after the Convening to share that bringing this exercise to a local planning meeting convinced all in attendance of the power and feasibility of the Project. Considerations of the multifaceted ways that the Project creates meaning led to several calls for future practice and research into the (1) administrative cost of running a Project and the potential for money saved by healthcare and community organizations; (2) optimal quantitative data collection methods to better demonstrate Project impact; (3) best ways to recruit culturally diverse teaching artists and to train them on cultural sensitivity; (4) ways to connect Lullaby teams across the world, to build a broader community; and (5) best ways to scale Projects overall.

### ***Evaluating the lullaby project***

The Convening also fostered discussion of Project evaluation and impact, by examining contributions to early childhood development, relational health, and caregiver well-being. Dr. Dennie Wolf and colleagues, including researchers and community leaders Todd Henkin, Kate Anderson, Anusha Mohan, Linda Russell, and Thomas Cabaniss, offered real-world examples demonstrating that the Project’s naturally occurring artefacts, such as lyrics and teaching artist-caregiver conversations, can also serve as powerful qualitative data. In this session, attendees were split into four smaller groups where they completed research-based activities, including short analyses of lyrics, case studies, micro-narratives and “free play” videos. These small groups covered topics including how Projects can (1) serve as tools for building caregivers’ reflective capacities (Cabaniss), (2) “offer respite and resources” to neurodiverse families (Henkin), (3) help build dyadic relationships that encourage thriving through play (Mohan and Anderson), and (4) support caregivers’ well-being (Wolf and Russell). Overall, these presentations demonstrated that the full impact of the Project extends beyond the traditional measures of numbers served and lullabies written, and that innovative methods of inquiry are essential for the continued assessment and improvement of the Project.

Further presentations from Dr. Nisha Sajjani, Dr. Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, and Wolf highlighted prior and ongoing work in the music for health and well-being space, with specific emphasis on the current research landscape, through the lenses of community health,

cultural sensitivity, and prior analyses of the Project itself. Sajnani provided an overview of the state of science and policy related to music and health, highlighting the work of the Jameel Arts & Health Lab, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), and the significant associations between arts participation and improved mental and physical health outcomes across the lifecycle (Sajnani & Fietje, 2023). She did, however, note that we have yet to achieve a full integration of the arts, healthcare, and public health initiatives, likely due to cultural divisions between the arts and the sciences, with specific focus on a lack of agreement on what serves as appropriate evidence; the difficulty in establishing causality between “complex and multi-modal” arts interventions and the alleviation of symptoms of “complex physical and mental health challenges that have multiple symptoms and root causes”; and a lack of awareness and sufficient evidence that establishes the importance of arts-based interventions alongside more traditional approaches, such as exercise and good nutrition (Sajnani & Fietje, 2023, p. 1733).

Relatedly, Wolf highlighted the importance of using the Lullaby model specifically to move to a science of care through deliberate design and implementation (Wolf et al., 2024). In line with the WHO’s definition of health as a condition that is not merely the absence of disease (World Health Organization, 1989), Wolf emphasized the role the Project could play in promoting thriving over simply surviving by, for example, playing a “diagnostic” role in community health centers by identifying families in need of social and emotional support or by creating new baby milestones like singing oneself to sleep. Wolf also discussed the importance of transitioning from deficit to strength-based models of care that focus on resilience, creativity and celebration through using new metrics, such as a “caregiver’s capacity to think about the interior life of the young child [they are] now responsible for.” She emphasized the importance of sustaining the impact of the Project, both in terms of policy change and personal benefits for caregivers and children, echoing Sajnani’s ongoing work.

Bartleet’s collaborative and ally-based work with First Nations populations demonstrated the importance of ensuring that community-centered projects are grounded in and supported by those they are meant to uplift. Bartleet emphasized that many music-focused initiatives target large-scale issues, such as combatting racism, but “in reality work more frequently on individual micro- and meso-level changes, with little understanding of how such changes might flow upstream to macro, structural goals, such as shifts in public policies, legislation, power structures, and social attitudes” (Bartleet, 2023, p. 41). As such, she suggested it is helpful for the Project to operate within frameworks that (1) consider the complex interplay between individual, relational, community, and societal factors; (2) seek to address the root causes of inequity, not just its downstream effects; (3) identify positive shifts programs and initiatives have caused in social and emotional connection for participants; and (4) investigate how project outcomes are tied to cultural determinants of health, such as “cultural expression, continuity of culture, self-determination and leadership.”

In his closing remarks, Dr. Vikram Patel, Paul Farmer Professor and Chair of the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School, noted that the Project serves the arts and health field through its unique focus on the special dyadic relationship between parent and child. Patel posits that health has been medicalized to a fault, creating an overreliance on the medical-industrial complex. He argued that community action, mobilization, and solidarity are essential tools for creating person-centered healthcare that promotes



mental health across the lifecycle: mental health should not just be “seen through the prism of diagnoses” and should not require a doctorate to address. He further noted that the medical-industrial complex inherently disempowers communities by converting fundamental behaviors into technical jargon, thus making it, “sound like loving your newborn is a medical issue, that this needs to be taught,” and that the Project is one powerful method to return power to communities by uplifting natural caregiver–child interactions. This series of presentations and discussions led to several questions and calls for future practice and research into how we can (1) build community models for the Project that can reach the “last mile” (Davison et al., 2021, p. 1); (2) gain support from and integrate into mainstream health efforts and organizations; (3) understand the preventative capabilities of the Project, for parent and child health; and (4) identify how Project performances and lullabies can become a public way of communicating community resilience and strength.

### ***Celebration: the lullaby concert and attendee post-convening reflections***

The Convening concluded with Carnegie Hall’s annual Lullaby Celebration Concert, where several songs from the Project were performed in Zankel Hall.<sup>4</sup> Families were invited to attend and perform, and their children and babies were encouraged to explore, dance, and make noise. One attendee noted that, unlike many traditional concert settings, the Lullaby Concert was, “lively and engaged. I sat next to Maggie, who was three, who looked at her mother like, ‘Can I stand up?’ And she was dancing, dancing, dancing, and the baby behind her began to fret, and she just turned around and for the rest of the concert entertained her and I thought, ‘What an astonishing *esprit*.’”

Attendees’ final reflections on the Convening compared the Project to “the water that we’re swimming in as fish, it’s just a part of us”; a wheat stalk, pushing on other stalks to cause change; and a patch of wildflowers grown from a seed bomb in an empty lot full of weeds. Others noted that the Project could lead to a world where tenderness and caretaking are encouraged as parts of men’s lives, where middle school classes teach the elements of music through writing lullabies, helping all children learn how to emotionally regulate and, “feel that accomplishment themselves.” Another compared the Project to the Hubble Telescope which, “. . . made the general public think of stewardship of the universe. Lullaby is one way to think of the stewardship of young families, not just my family, but [the one] who is in the street or who I sit next to on the subway.”

### **Conclusions: implications for practice and research**

Carnegie Hall’s Lullaby Project exemplifies a transformative, culturally responsive arts and health model for caregiver well-being, early childhood development, and relational health. Since its inception, the Project has demonstrated how a music-based intervention can support individual and community health, both within and outside of traditional healthcare environments, through community partnerships. The Project’s scalability, relatively low cost, and emphasis on cultural sensitivity make it an innovative approach to supporting families. The sessions at the 2024 Lullaby Convening underscored the importance of trauma-informed, community-centered approaches in implementation that yield meaningful, culturally responsive engagements with families. The Project’s ability to foster deep connections, while also

providing emotional support to caregivers, across varied cultural contexts, showcases its adaptability and far-reaching relevance. Moreover, the Project's emphasis on co-creation and shared learning between teaching artists and families highlights the reciprocal nature of this work, which strengthens both the individual participants and the broader community. Furthermore, the Project's growing focus on longitudinal engagement and continuous evaluation reflects a commitment to not only immediate impact but also sustained change. The calls for future research, particularly on long-term impact on trauma mitigation, caregiver well-being, and child development, are vital for expanding the evidence base and refining the Project. Additionally, integrating the Project into existing healthcare frameworks holds promise for broader systemic change, reducing costs and improving outcomes for families and healthcare providers alike. Considering these insights, the Project serves as a powerful model for how arts-based interventions can be leveraged to support vulnerable populations, help begin to heal traumas and promote individual and community well-being. Its ongoing evolution and the continued commitment of its partners signal a promising future for this approach to public health and community care.

## Notes

1. A lullaby repository can be found on the Lullaby Project SoundCloud page, at <https://soundcloud.com/carnegiehalllullaby>.
2. To access a copy of the journal in English: <https://www.carnegiehall.org/-/media/CarnegieHall/Files/PDFs/Explore/Learn/Write-a-Personal-Lullaby/2024-2025-Lullaby-Project-Fillable-Journal-English.pdf>.  
To access a copy of the journal in Spanish:  
<https://www.carnegiehall.org/-/media/CarnegieHall/Files/PDFs/Explore/Learn/Write-a-Personal-Lullaby/2024-2025-Lullaby-Project-Fillable-Journal-Spanish.pdf?la=en&hash=A2BA8C4AA53D47D4CF6DEF88DC5A4178>.  
To access a copy of the journal in French:  
<https://www.carnegiehall.org/-/media/CarnegieHall/Files/PDFs/Explore/Learn/Write-a-Personal-Lullaby/2024-2025-Lullaby-Project-Fillable-Journal-French.pdf?la=en&hash=CB32E4F69F4C02E58E2CB66A97A50693>.
3. To request a copy of this handbook, please write to [http://lullabyproject@carnegiehall.org](mailto:http://lullabyproject@carnegiehall.org).
4. A full recording of the 2024 Lullaby Project Celebration Concert can be found at: <https://www.carnegiehall.org/Calendar/2024/06/01/Lullaby-Project-Celebration-Concert-0300PM>.

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## Data availability statement

Due to the nature of the research, and the ethics protocol for this study, a repository of supporting data is not publicly available.

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