People have sung to their babies forever. Every culture has lullabies and children’s songs that are passed down through the generations. New ones are written and shared, and the custom goes on—a rich part of the fabric of human civilization. These songs are designed to relax babies, calm their fears, or entertain and amuse them throughout childhood. As we have learned more about the life and capabilities of fetuses, we have realized that a fetus can hear clearly for months before birth, and can also discriminate sounds. At birth, newborns respond to familiar sounds by becoming calm and orienting toward the source of the sound, and even indicate their preferences for familiar voices and words over the unfamiliar.

Newborn babies prefer their parents’ voices, and other familiar ones, over those of strangers, and they prefer hearing a story that their mother had read frequently while they were in utero over an unfamiliar story, or even the familiar one read by someone other than their mother. Fetuses hear, remember, have preferences, respond to, and discriminate among differences—in sounds, music, voices.

These exciting findings have inspired educators to advocate prenatal learning through recordings played through a mother’s abdomen (of languages, music and other things). They have inspired birth activists and baby advocates to provide a safe, enriching environment for the fetus. Advocates of prenatal bonding emphasize communication between parent and unborn child as a powerful way to strengthen the bond.
Beautiful Music: The Benefits of Singing to your Baby, Before and After Birth

By Penny Simkin, P.T.

People have sung to their babies forever. Every culture has lullabies and children's songs that are passed down through the generations. New songs are written and shared, and the nursery game is a birthright part of the fabric of human civilization. These songs are designed to relax babies, calm their fears, or entertain and amuse them throughout childhood. As we have learned more about the 4th and capabilities of babies, we have realized that a baby can hear clearly for months before birth, and can also discriminate sounds. At birth, newborns respond to familiar sounds by becoming calm and toward the source of the sound, and even indicate their preferences for familiar voices and words over the unfamiliar.

Newborns habituate their parent's voice, and other familiar ones, over those of strangers, and they prefer hearing a story that their mother had read frequently while they were in stillbirth or an unscheduled story, or even the familiar one read by someone other than their father. Research has demonstrated preferences, responsiveness, and discrimination among new borns, infants, and toddlers.

These exciting findings have generated hypotheses to advance prenatal training through singing played repeatedly to fetuses. These new birth songs and other special music are designed to enhance bonding, soothe, and play with their child for years to come. Parents have the opportunity to give their baby's transition to extra-uterine life is hectic and full of new sensations. He cries reflexively, but also of singing the same song every day. Not only does the baby hear his or her parents' voices, not only does he or she hear music, but the baby also gets to know one song that can soothe, comfort, turn, and the sounds of words that he has heard many times before—something he likes. He calms down when he hears Maia singing the familiar song.

Recent students in my birth class took my suggestion to heart, singing “Las Mañanitas,” a Mexican Christmas carol, every single day. The baby turned his head, turned his face right toward his father, and cried down within the first song time strapped. As I looked around the operating room, I saw a nurse on the neonatal floor.

It's a moment I'll never forget, and it was that event that taught me the value not only of singing to the baby, but also of singing the same song every day. Not only does the baby love hearing their parents singing. Seeing the parents caressing the mother's belly as they sang was heartwarming. That happened in the mid-1980s, when much research on the capabilities of the unborn and newborn baby was beginning to be published. Recalling those special circumstances, I have always suggested to our students in childbirth classes that there is no greater bond than the one that you can make with your newborn baby.

I'd like to offer my take on this phenomenon, and urge everyone who works with expectant parents to tell them about some unique and heartwarming benefits of singing or reciting rhymes to their unborn babies:

1. Fetuses respond to music by calming, becoming active, changes in fetal heart rate (depending on how the mother feels), new noises heard by the baby, and other physiological changes.
2. Newborns and young babies are calmed by familiar music, as demonstrated by the universal response to music by newborns.
3. Repetitive prenatal reading of one story by one parent every day for weeks results in the newborn remembering the story.
4. Newborns prefer their parents' voices over the voices of strangers.
5. Fetuses can sense audio vibrations and rhythms early in pregnancy. Later in pregnancy they respond to music by calming and moving to the sound.
6. It's a moment I'll never forget, and it was that event that taught me the value not only of singing to the baby, but also of singing the same song every day.