

Fussy baby? Research shows singing works better than persuasive rhetoric

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“When it’s singing, the words didn’t seem to matter,” says Trehub. Credit: Donnie Ray Jones via flickr

When it comes to keeping your baby calm, a song does a much better job than speech.

That's the finding from a new first-of-its-kind study co-led by University of Toronto Mississauga Professor Emeritus Sandra Trehub.

Collaborating on the research with a professor and doctoral student at the University of Montreal, she found that singing to [infants](#) delays the onset of distress by twice as long as talking to them. The study was published in the online version of the journal *Infancy*.

"One of the things that probably makes singing so effective in terms of emotion regulation is the fact that it's very repetitive and predictable; the timing is exact, you keep the beat," says Trehub, director of the Music Development Lab at UTM's Infant and Child Studies Centre in the department of psychology.

"I think, in doing that, you can almost hypnotize infants, you capture them or distract them or whatever it is, but they become quite captivated by that rhythmic, repetitive material coming in."

The research involved playing three types of sounds to 58 male and female infants, age seven to 10 months, who were put into two groups. One group was exposed to audio recordings of adult-directed speech (speech conducted in an adult tone of voice), as well as speech and [song](#) in an infant-directed style, all in French (the most familiar language for the infants). The other group was exposed to the same three stimuli in Turkish, to determine whether the simple, repetitive rhythms of the music would capture their attention despite their unfamiliarity with the language.

In both cases, the infants were seated in front of their mothers in a dimly lit sound booth that was covered with black cloth and had no toys, people or other stimuli. The objective was to determine how long the infants would attend to each recording before exhibiting the "cry face" – lowered brows, lip corners pulled to the side, mouth opening and raised

cheeks.

The babies in the group listening to Turkish sounds remained calm for an average duration of nine minutes while listening to the song. Their attention lasted just over four minutes for the infant-directed Turkish talk, and just under four minutes for the adult-directed Turkish talk. The results were similar for the French stimuli group, with the infants attending to the song for about six minutes.

The results, Trehub says, reflect that song, regardless of the level of familiarity with the language, is much more powerful than words at capturing the attention of infants, and helping them to regulate their emotions and avoid distress. She says it also shows that infants can be just as engaged by song as adults, even though they cannot show it with movements.

"When it's singing, the words didn't seem to matter, because the song was done very rhythmically in this lively, positive and pleasant manner, so it seemed to captivate them," Trehub says. "Adults can dance, bob their head or tap their foot to a song, because their brains are tracking things in sync to the music.

"The suggestion with this study is that those internal things are happening in babies, even though you don't see coordinated movement externally."

Trehub says the findings will be useful to parents wanting to more effectively soothe their infant children, and to professionals who deal with infants and their caregivers, such as pediatricians and nurses.

Provided by University of Toronto

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