

The Star Newspaper, Sunday May 15, 2011

Music in the womb

WOMEN'S WORLD

By Dr NOR ASHIKIN MOKHTAR

starhealth@thestar.com.my

You may have heard claims that prenatal music stimulation can promote intelligence, creativity and advanced development. The scientific jury is still out on this, because different studies show different results.

I GET a lot of questions from pregnant mothers about whether music is good for their unborn babies. Some mummies want their babies to be born musical geniuses, while others see it as a way to communicate and bond with their little ones.

While music is good for the foetus in the womb, mothers need to practise this in moderation and choose the right type of music.



Some research suggests that exposure to music can make children smarter in maths and spatial reasoning, but these studies were carried out on older children, not on foetuses in the womb. – AP

In this article, I will explain how a baby begins to hear in the womb, the benefits of music for foetal development, and the right way to play music for your baby.

So, let's strike up the band!

Baby begins to hear

About two months into your pregnancy, you will start to see your baby's eyes, nose and ears on the ultrasound. However, for the next four months, your baby will not fully develop his or her hearing senses yet. A baby's ears will only begin to stand out on the sides of his or her head at 18 weeks into pregnancy. At the same time, the nerve endings from the baby's brain are connected

to the ears. The first sounds he or she hears are probably your heart beating, your stomach rumbling, or blood moving through the umbilical cord. Eventually, he or she will learn to recognise familiar voices, like yours. He or she can even hear loud noises and may be startled into moving around or kicking your stomach.

Musical stimulation

Many experts believe that stimuli like sounds (voices and music), movement, pressure, vibrations and light can be used to communicate with a baby inside the womb, and encourage the baby's physical, mental and sensory development. The baby learns to recognise and respond to different stimuli, such as your voice. This not only promotes bonding between mother and baby, but also helps baby to develop memory. You may have heard claims that prenatal music stimulation can promote intelligence, creativity and advanced development. The scientific jury is still out on this, because different studies show different results.

Some early childhood researchers argue that babies who have been stimulated while in the womb grow up to have more advanced visual, auditory, language and motor development skills. The researchers even say that the babies sleep better, are more alert to their environment and surroundings, and are far more content, compared to babies without prenatal stimulation.

Some research even suggests that exposure to music can make children smarter in maths and spatial reasoning, but these studies were carried out on older children, not on foetuses in the womb. There are also a lot of anecdotal evidence from parents who are convinced that their babies recognise and respond to familiar music and voices while in the womb.

However, with such a differing range of evidence, it is not possible to confirm that music stimulation during pregnancy can contribute to a more intelligent child. Still, there is no harm in exposing your unborn baby to a variety of musical stimulation, as it will be enjoyable and soothing for both you and baby.

Choosing the playlist

Just how do you play music for your baby in the womb? Do you put your iPod right next to your stomach, or just play the music in the background? Both methods work, but you have to be careful not to overdo it or play it at an overly loud volume. If you are using an iPod or similar type of music player, you can connect a pair of headphones and stretch the headphones around your stomach.

However, because the music is up close, you should not turn the volume up or play beyond an hour a day. Otherwise, you may overstimulate the baby. Overstimulation will not harm your baby physically, but it can make him or her feel overwhelmed by the stimuli and stop responding.

You can also play music on your CD player in the background. Again, do not pump up the volume as you may hurt or startle your baby. The maximum volume should not be more than 70 decibels, which is about the same level as background music that is played in a store.

The type of music you choose is also important. There are a lot of baby music products in the market, mostly within the classical music genre. Certainly, some experts recommend Mozart's symphonies because they have the right mix of new sounds and repetition. Generally, discordant, chaotic music or vulgar lyrics are not considered suitable, with some experts saying that it could negatively alter the brain's structure.

The real role of music

If you do decide to make your pregnancy a musical journey, be realistic about your motivations and expectations. Don't do it with the aim of creating a musical or intellectual genius. As I mentioned, there is no concrete scientific evidence to show that this will happen, and you will be setting yourself up for disappointment. Instead, look purely at the enjoyable qualities of music. Pregnancy can bring about mood swings or stressful moments, so playing music could help you to relax and indirectly be good for your unborn baby.

If you're feeling down or anxious, listening to your favourite jazz song could cheer you up. A bit of dancing could take the weight off your shoulders too, as long as it's nothing too vigorous.

So let the music play, and heal your soul.

Datuk Dr Nor Ashikin Mokhtar is a consultant obstetrician & gynaecologist (FRCOG, UK). For further information, visit www.primanora.com. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.