

# Healthcare musicians can uplift families with premature infants during intensive care, research suggests

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When a premature infant is born, the family's image of what life with a baby will be like may come crashing down.

"The [parents](#) must let go of their earlier expectations and try to adjust to life in an [intensive care unit](#) amid various care procedures and medical staff," Taru Koivisto describes the situation.

In intensive care units, parents may feel that there is very little time for actual parenthood and forming a relationship with the baby. Extremely important treatment measures are given the priority over everything else. At the same time, parents live in constant fear and worry over whether their baby ends up passing away or having a permanent disability.

## **Music brings the newborn to the center**

Professional musicians working in medical care units can help bring parents closer to the newborn and improve their relationship. Music practitioners are not music therapists or nurses, but [professional musicians](#) who have specialized in performing music and bringing their musical and pedagogical expertise into hospital contexts. In practice, musicians work often in collaboration with music therapists.

"A moment of music can create an intimate atmosphere where the parents can forget about treatments, tubes and machines and put their entire focus on their baby and truly see them," Koivisto explains.

Music practitioners can be present in different treatment procedures or interact with the family in corridors or patient rooms at the hospital. Musicians sing and perform for and with everyone in equal proportion and in a sensitive way. They can sing to the newborns when they are awake, or perform to the parents, grandparents or [medical staff](#), who are also welcome to join the singing.

## **A sign of life from the outside world**

Koivisto categorizes the role of music for the parents of a [premature infant](#) who is in intensive care by using metaphors that emerged from the speech of some of the parents, nurses and music practitioners. For example, some parents perceived music as something that took them through "deep waters", referring to their difficult time in the hospital.

"For the parents, music was a sign of life from outside of the hospital and helped them understand that life will carry on even in hard times," Koivisto says.

When a family's premature infant goes into intensive care, their life is changed permanently.

"Music moments were described as a break that allowed the whole family to metaphorically travel to another space or place. A shared musical journey together may have helped the family members create a new narrative for their life."

The musicians and the hospital staff, too, found this kind of shared event highly intimate and delicate.

## **'Reading the room' is an essential professional skill**

Music practitioners must have not only professional skills needed for working in a hospital environment and as a [musician](#), but also delicate understanding of when and where to perform music and what kind of music and what instruments are suitable for the situation. For example, musicians do not disrupt the silence when premature infants are asleep, because sleep is a crucial element in the healing and development of infants.

Musicians must also be socially intelligent and "read the room" very quickly in everyday social situations, which often involve a battle

between life and death. In one room, the atmosphere may be serene and drowsy, while another room may be filled with loss and grief.

"In fact, the musicians I interviewed noted that even though the work feels extremely meaningful, it may not be suited for everyone."

Music can also be a tool for the parents to process their feelings. At times, their song requests for music practitioners were songs that dealt with difficult issues. One nurse mentioned being worried that the sad [music](#) might overwhelm the parents with emotion. However, the nurse noticed that each time, the impact that the songs had was positive.

"In one of the example situations, a mother of a baby asked her own mother, the grandmother of the baby, whether the song she chose was too emotional for her. The grandmother said no. When they sang the song together, the grandmother started crying, but the mother of the child was content in her own way," Koivisto notes.

**More information:** Taru-Anneli Koivisto, Making our way through the deep waters of life, *Expanding Professionalism in Music and Higher Music Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.4324/9781003108337-10](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003108337-10)

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