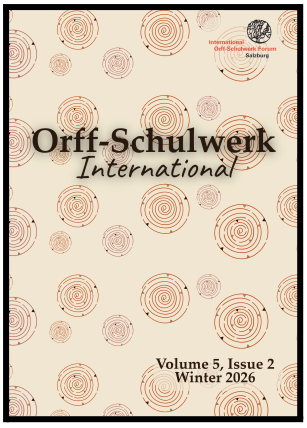
International
Orff-Schulwerk Forum
Salzburg



Orff-Schulwerk *International*
Volume 5, Issue 2

ISSN 2791-4763 (Online)

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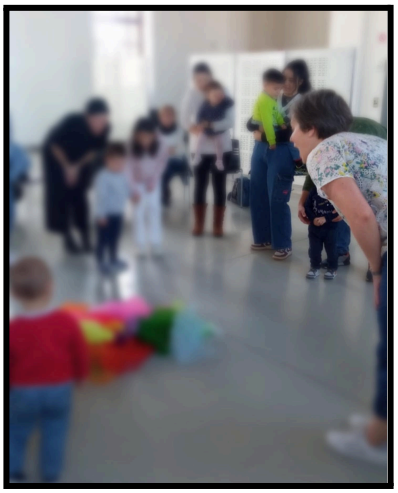
Published online: November 2026

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Growing Through Reading and Music: Promoting Well-Being in Families with Children Aged 0–6

Virginia Longo

Introduction



In 2011 I was invited by a local paediatrician to co-lead a workshop for families at a public library. I was asked to lead two sessions: one for children aged 6 to 36 months and another for children aged 3 to 6 years. In both cases, parents were actively involved. Musically, I proposed what could be described as an interactive reading of a children's book, enriched with songs, chants, nursery rhymes, movement, and simple percussion activities. In other words, it was essentially an Orff-Schulwerk music lesson built around a book. Each music session was introduced by a short talk from the paediatrician, who explained to parents the benefits of making music at home with their children. She also gave families informational materials such as flyers and bookmarks.

That was the beginning of my journey into the fascinating world of *Nati per la Musica* (Born to Music) first, and later *Nati per Leggere* (Born to Read). Many family workshops followed that first experience. Before long, I was invited to join a multidisciplinary team of specialists—including paediatricians, librarians, musicians, and music educators—whose role was to promote the two programmes throughout the country and to train professionals who would work directly with children and families.

The Two Programmes

Nati per Leggere (Born to Read) was established in Italy in 1999 through a partnership between the Italian Library Association, the Cultural Association of Paediatricians, and the Centre for Child Health. It is a national programme that promotes reading aloud within families with children from birth to six years of age, supporting their emotional, cognitive, and social development.

In 2006, *Nati per la Musica* (Born to Music) was launched, bringing together musicians and music educators alongside the original partners. Today, professionals increasingly integrate the two programmes into their daily work with children and families.

Both programmes rely on the commitment of trained professionals as well as dedicated volunteers.

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Nurturing Care for early Child Development

Now you might be asking yourselves: Why should we invest so much effort in promoting shared reading and active music-making within the family from such an early age?

According to the 2018 document *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development: A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential*, published by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and the World Bank Group, the foundations for lifelong health, learning, and well-being are established in the earliest years of life. '*What is one of the best ways a country can boost shared prosperity, promote inclusive economic growth, expand equitable opportunity, and end extreme poverty? The answer is simple: Invest in early childhood development'*(p.1)

The period from pregnancy to a child's third birthday is a unique and highly sensitive stage of development. During these first 1,000 days, children are especially responsive to the influences of their environment. The experiences they have during this time lay the foundations for lifelong health, learning, emotional well-being, and productivity, while also shaping the health and well-being of future generations. In fact, although brain development follows a genetically programmed pathway, it is profoundly shaped by the child's experiences.

Research has identified several major threats to healthy early childhood development. These include extreme poverty, insecurity, gender inequality, violence, environmental toxins, and poor mental health. Such challenges affect not only children directly but also their caregivers—parents, family members, and others responsible for their care. When caregivers face these difficulties, their ability to provide the protection, support, and nurturing that young children need is significantly reduced.

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According to this document, the components of Nurturing Care are

1. Good Health
2. Adequate Nutrition
3. Opportunities for Early Child Development
4. Responding Caregivers
5. Security and Safety

Both Born to Read and *Born to Music* contribute to Component 3: Responsive Caregiving and Component 4: Opportunities for Early Learning of the Nurturing Care Framework.

Component 3: Responsive Caregiving

During the first years of life, infants and young children rely entirely on their caregivers to recognize and respond to their needs. These needs go well beyond food and safety. Children also need warm social interactions, cognitive stimulation, emotional support, and reassurance.

Responsive caregivers carefully observe their child's signals, understand what the child is communicating, and respond consistently, appropriately, and with affection. Everyday exchanges—making eye contact, following the child's gaze, talking, listening, and taking turns in communication—lay the groundwork for early learning. When caregivers are sensitive, predictable, and loving, they foster secure attachment, support social and emotional development, and provide the conditions children need to learn and thrive.

To strengthen responsive caregiving and provide opportunities for early learning, professionals working across many settings, including healthcare, education, nutrition, childcare, emergency services, and social and family support programmes, should be trained to recognize and reinforce caregivers' strengths, strengthen their confidence, and encourage them to communicate more with their children; suggest enjoyable activities families can share at home, using everyday objects and homemade toys, as well as talking, singing, and sharing books; promote high-quality parent–child interactions through age-appropriate play and communication activities; and encourage parents to spend more meaningful time with their children.

Component 4: Opportunities for Early Learning

Children do not begin learning only when they enter kindergarten or pre-primary education at around age 3 or 4, when they are introduced to colours, shapes, and letters. Learning is instead an inherent human capacity, necessary for adapting to an ever-changing environment. It begins at conception and initially develops through a biological process known as epigenesis.

In the earliest stages of life, learning occurs through relationships with others. It develops through everyday interactions such as smiling, making eye contact, talking, singing, imitation, and simple games such as waving goodbye. Children also learn through play with ordinary household objects—such as cups, empty containers, and cooking pots—which allow them to explore texture, function, and possible uses.

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Even caregivers with limited time can be supported and encouraged to talk with their child during routine activities such as feeding, bathing, and other daily tasks. These seemingly simple exchanges offer powerful opportunities for learning, helping children understand people and the world around them.

***Both Born to Read* and *Born to Music* today**



Nowadays, out of 6,000 paediatricians in Italy there are around 1,700 that support the two programmes. The family paediatrician is responsible for monitoring a child's health and development through scheduled well-child visits at key developmental stages. These visits provide an ideal opportunity to conduct a comprehensive health assessment, monitor physical growth, evaluate psychomotor development, and assess the achievement of age-appropriate cognitive, linguistic, and sensory milestones. Paediatricians can explain to parents the importance of shared reading and family music-making, encouraging them to introduce books, nursery rhymes, songs, and musical activities into their daily interactions with their children from the very first months of life.

Public libraries also play a fundamental role in promoting both *Born to Read* and *Born to Music*. Although the distribution of the programmes is not uniform across Italy, there is an extensive network of officially recognised *Born to Read* and *Born to Music* Centres that coordinate and deliver activities at the local level. However, for both programmes, activities can be offered in a variety of locations, including libraries, health services, nurseries, preschools, family centres, music schools, and other community venues where appropriately trained professionals are available. These centres work within local interdisciplinary networks involving paediatricians, librarians, educators, healthcare professionals, and musicians.

One of the defining characteristics of both *Born to Read* and *Born to Music* is that all activities are offered free of charge to participating families. This reflects the principle of universality, one of the core values of the Italian National Health Service and one of the guiding principles of both programmes.

The Evidence Supporting *Born to Read*

Over the past three decades, a substantial body of research has demonstrated the benefits of shared reading during early childhood. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses consistently show that reading aloud to young children has significant positive effects on language development, particularly on receptive language (language comprehension), one of the strongest predictors of later academic achievement.

The benefits extend beyond cognition. Research consistently shows that shared reading enhances the quality of parent–child interactions, strengthens parental confidence and self-efficacy, and supports children's emotional well-being. Importantly, these cognitive and socio-emotional benefits are greatest among children growing up in socioeconomically

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disadvantaged families, making shared reading one of the most effective early interventions for reducing educational and social inequalities before school entry.

Reading aloud therefore focuses not only on the child but also on the unique environment created by the interaction between the book and the parent. In shared reading, the parent is regarded as a valuable teacher who adapts their support to the level of competence the child is able to achieve at that particular moment. This teaching process, described by Jerome Bruner as scaffolding, provides a foundation built not only on affection but also on the parent's ability to recognise the child's current level of understanding. Supported in this way, the child can progressively develop language and early literacy skills through shared book reading.

This process takes place within what Lev Vygotsky defined as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—the developmental space in which a child can learn or solve a problem only with the guidance and collaboration of a more knowledgeable adult. The parent's sensitivity lies in recognising what the child is ready to learn at that specific stage of development and providing appropriate support.
Dialogic Reading (DR) differs fundamentally from the traditional way adults read to children. The change in roles is crucial. In conventional shared reading, the adult reads while the child listens. In dialogic reading, however, the child gradually becomes the storyteller. The adult progressively assumes the role of an active listener, asking questions, adding information, encouraging the child to elaborate on the story, and prompting increasingly rich language use.

An important aspect related to Dialogic Reading is the crucial role of the mother tongue reinforced in Italy by the project *Mamma Lingua*. The Mother Tongue Manifesto has been translated into 19 languages and widely distributed to libraries, schools, paediatric clinics, and community organisations across Italy to promote the value of multilingualism and encourage both immigrant and Italian families to share stories and read together.

The Evidence Supporting *Born to Music*
Born to Music is a programme dedicated to exploring the value of shared musical experiences within the family. The main goal is to promote early listening and family music-making as powerful means of communication that strengthen the emotional bond between parents and their children while fostering both cognitive and socio-emotional development.

According to the *Born to Music Manifesto*, the beneficial effects of music—including instrumental performance, singing, and listening—have long been recognised. Over the past decades, however, rigorous scientific research (e.g.Hallam, 2016) has demonstrated that musical experiences, beginning during the prenatal period and continuing throughout childhood, stimulate children's cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and social development while providing outstanding opportunities for high-quality interactions between parents and their children. Research has also shown that early musical experiences enhance communication skills and the core cognitive functions required for non-musical learning.

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Evidence from longitudinal studies (e.g. Paquette & Mignault Goulet, 2014) comparing individuals who have received musical education with those who have not, indicates that music has positive effects not only during the earliest stages of human development but throughout the lifespan, extending into adulthood and old age. For these reasons, it is essential that everyone who is directly or indirectly responsible for the education and care of children—including parents, teachers, healthcare professionals, school administrators, policy makers responsible for educational programmes, and those involved in extracurricular activities—promote the adoption of good early musical practices, both at home and in educational settings.

Informal Education

In terms of suggested activities, parents, caregivers and educators are invited to refer to *informal education* that is understood as a series of stimuli, experiences, and opportunities for learning provided by the family and by those within the child's immediate social environment. These include teaching songs, nursery rhymes, movement games linked to sound and music, rhythmic and melodic imitation activities, and, more simply, fostering attentive listening through the regular practice of storytelling and reading aloud traditional tales and folktales.



This educational approach closely resembles the philosophy of active music making promoted by the Orff-Schulwerk.

One of the main aims of *Born to Music* is to help adults reconnect with their own innate musicality—their "inner musical child"—and to develop the confidence to sing, play, and make music naturally with their babies and young children. The programme seeks to restore music-making as a spontaneous, joyful, and meaningful part of daily family interactions rather than as an activity reserved for professional performers.

Music educators and musicians need to take particular care when planning activities for family workshops. While they should always offer high-quality musical experiences, chants, songs, movement activities, and musical games they propose must be accessible and easy for parents and caregivers to reproduce at home. The aim is to help adults feel confident, competent, and empowered to incorporate similar musical interactions into their everyday family life.

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Virginia Longo holds a Master of Arts (MA) in Violin and Literature and later specialized in Music Education through training in Italy and abroad. In 2008–2009, she completed the Postgraduate Course in Music and Dance Education at the Orff Institute in Salzburg. Since 2011, she has worked as a music teacher and Coordinator of the Arts Department at the International School of Bergamo, an IOSFS Associated School since 2018.

Among her many professional interests, education and music education for children aged 0–6 hold a particularly important place. She has explored this specific age group through Music Learning Theory, developed by Edwin E. Gordon, attending training courses offered by AIGAM and *Musica in Culla*/Music in Crib, as well as workshops and seminars at the Reggio Children Centre. For the past 15 years, she has also collaborated with paediatricians and librarians through the national *Born to Read* and *Born to Music* programmes. She also works as a teacher educator and has served on the IOSFS Board since 2021.

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