

NPA Position Statement: Coping During COVID-19 Free Resources for Your NICU from the National Network of NICU Psychologists (NNNP)

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The National Perinatal Association (NPA) is an interdisciplinary organization that strives to be a leading voice for perinatal care in the United States. Our diverse membership is comprised of healthcare providers, parents & caregivers, educators, and service providers, all driven by their desire to give voice to and support babies and families at risk across the country.

Members of the NPA write a regular peer-reviewed column in *Neonatology Today*.



Educate. Advocate. Integrate.

The National Network of NICU Psychologists (NNNP), a recently reorganized sub-organization of the National Perinatal Association, has over 65 members across 19 states. The NNNP strives to be the leading voice and resource for mental health services in NICU settings. We believe that national collaboration among NICU psychologist is essential to state-of-the-art education, clinical research, and advocacy for policy development and change. As a group, we provide mentorship to those entering our profession and advocate for the role of psychologists and other mental health professionals in the NICU setting.

In response to the emergent infant, caregiver, and staff/provider mental health needs in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have created three handouts to promote wellness for NICU families and providers. The handouts cover the following topics: "Bonding with Your Baby During the COVID-19 Pandemic," "Caregivers

Need Care Too During The COVID-19 Pandemic," and "Helping Children and Families Cope With Having a Baby in the NICU During the COVID-19 Pandemic". We hope you use these tools to support improved models of care in your NICUs during this time. Please feel free to distribute it widely.

These handouts are also available on our website: www.nationalperinatal.org/psychologists

Members of the NNNP are also hosting/attending regular peer mentoring calls to discuss topics related to mental health services in NICUs during the pandemic. We invite any psychologists working in the NICU and/or related settings to join the NNNP. If interested in joining our efforts, please visit our website www.nationalperinatal.org/psychologists

Disclosure: The National Perinatal Association www.nationalperinatal.org is a 501c3 organization that provides education and advocacy around issues affecting the health of mothers, babies, and families.

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FREE RESOURCES FOR YOUR NICU

Coping During COVID-19

Targeted interventions to improve the mental health of parents, infants, families, and providers

BONDING WITH YOUR BABY



HELPING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COPE

CAREGIVERS NEED CARE TOO



National Network
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BONDING WITH YOUR BABY

DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Being separated from your baby is challenging no matter the circumstances. Being separated because your baby needs intensive care in the NICU especially stressful.

Now, because of the risks of COVID-19 infection are so serious, the **rules about visitation** have changed. **When you visit the NICU things will not look the same** as they did before the pandemic. We are all doing our best to learn what we need to do to stay safe and protect each other.

Life is also different outside of the NICU. Daily routines have changed. Meeting our basic needs is harder. The people we go to for love and support may be far away. We understand this, but we want you to know that you and your baby will be ok.

You and your baby have a special bond. This bond gives your baby a **sense of security**, forms the **basis for learning and development**, and sets the stage for future **healthy relationships**.

This bond and attachment will continue to grow even if you sometimes have to be apart.



HERE ARE SOME IDEAS FOR BONDING WITH YOUR BABY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.



WHEN YOU'RE AT THE HOSPITAL

- **Touch your baby.** When you touch your baby it releases positive hormones for both of you that decrease stress and increase feelings of attachment. You and your baby's medical team can figure out the best way to touch your baby based on their medical condition. It may be supportive touch, bundled holding, or skin-to-skin care (also called kangaroo care).
- **Do as much of your baby's routine care as possible.** Each time you help your baby by changing their diaper, feeding them, bathing them, taking their temperature, or doing mouth care you will feel more connected to your baby. Ask for help as needed as you get more comfortable doing these care tasks.



ALWAYS USE GOOD NICU HYGIENE



WHEN YOU'RE AT THE HOSPITAL continued

- **Have a “mindfulness moment” with your baby.** While you are touching your baby, focus in on one body part at a time, such as baby’s hands. Notice each detail of how they look and feel while you are touching them. Pay attention to the smell of your baby’s skin. Look at each tiny nail and finger one at a time. Take your time as you look at and appreciate each little part.
- **Talk to your baby.** Babies recognize their parents’ voices and find them comforting. Talking to your baby can help you feel more connected. Talk about your day or what you see baby doing.
- **Create a hello and good-bye routine.** Each time you come to the NICU greet your baby in the same way with a gentle touch and kind words. Before you leave, read your baby a book or sing them a favorite song, and again offer a special, loving touch.
- **Take pictures of your baby** each time you visit to document this moment in time and see their progress. You can share these pictures with the people who love them and use them to think about baby when you are away from the hospital.



- **Exchange scent cloths.** Scent cloths are a piece of fabric that you use to pick up someone’s scent. You can use two square or heart shaped pieces of fabric, or any other piece of cotton fabric that has been washed in scent-free detergent.



Keep one near your skin, tucked in your shirt, to pick up your scent. Leave one in the isolette or crib to pick up baby’s scent. **Then swap the cloths so baby has one that smells like you, and you take the one home that smells like baby.** Babies have a well-developed sense of smell and recognize their parents this way. **Smelling your scent will comfort your baby when you are away.**

- **Bring a family picture or sibling's drawings to keep near your baby’s bed space.** Even though baby is not looking at the pictures it can help bring your family closer to baby and reminds everyone who sees it who they are helping to take care of.



WHEN YOU'RE AT THE HOSPITAL continued

- **Teach people about your baby's likes and dislikes.** Partner with your baby's nurse and create a list of what you have noticed that your baby likes and does not like. This could include use of a pacifier for support, comforting touch your baby likes, and care tasks that are harder for baby, so staff knows to provide more support at these times.



WHEN YOU'RE AWAY

- **Your baby will not forget you!** Many NICU parents worry that their baby will forget them if they are not at the hospital. Remember that your baby will always recognize you when you return based on your scent, voice, and familiar touch. Your baby knows the difference between you and the NICU staff based on these differences. Remind yourself that babies do not have a sense of time. They live in the moment and do not have an awareness of how long it has been since your last visit. As a parent it is hard to be away, but remember that your baby is not able to think about or worry about the time in between visits.
- **Sleep with the scent cloth that smells like your baby.** This will help you feel connected and has been shown to give a boost to parents' mood. Parents and siblings could all benefit from a scent cloth that smells like baby.
- **Check in with NICU staff between care times.** Ask for specific information about your baby's changes and activities that will help you understand what your baby's day is like. This may be by phone, video chats, or notes.
- **Ask NICU staff to play a voice recording you make for baby.** Record yourself talking, singing or reading to baby and ask the staff to play it during baby's daily routine.



SELF-CARE IS ESSENTIAL

In order to be there for your baby when you visit, it is essential to give some priority to your own self-care while you are away from the hospital.

Everything you do for yourself will directly benefit your baby.

You may not be able to engage in complete self-care in an ideal way right now, but improving even a little on each of these will help:

- **Get as much sleep as possible.** If you are pumping, ask your lactation consultant about having at least one longer stretch between pumps. Build up your sleep a little at a time. Having a set bedtime and bedtime routine can help a lot. Avoid screen time in the hour before bedtime.
- **Remember to eat meals**, and when you cannot eat meals, try high protein snacks.
- **Have a water bottle** always near to help you drink more water.
- **Try one of these activities** for **5-15 minutes** during the day:
 - Practice deep breathing.
 - Create mindfulness exercises.
 - Go for a walk outside if possible, keeping social distance from others.
 - Take a warm bath or shower.
 - Listen to music.
 - Read a favorite book or magazine.
 - Draw or work on a coloring book.
 - Make time for your hobbies. Knit. Cook. Play games.
 - Connect virtually with a friend or another NICU parent.
 - Help someone. Ask someone for help.



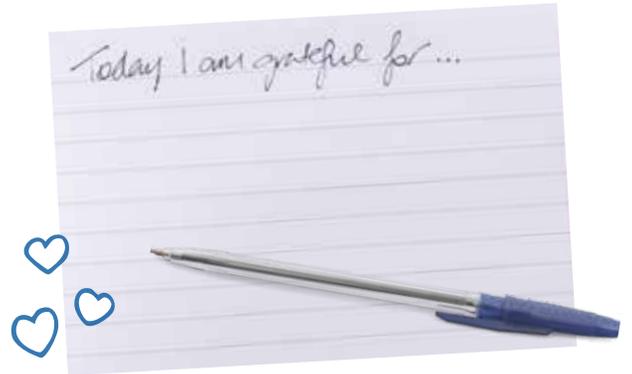
MY SELF-CARE GOAL:



WHEN YOU'RE AWAY continued

- **Ask NICU staff if seeing baby by video is possible** while you are away.
- **Start a scrapbook for your baby.** Either a digital or physical scrapbook with pictures of baby's journey can help you feel connected to baby and incorporate baby's journey into your family's story. Add writing to the journal, including things that are personal for baby like how you picked baby's name, your baby's personality, and their characteristics.

- **Journal about baby.** Journaling can take many different forms, and can be done in a regular notebook, your phone notes, or an app (e.g. MyPreemie or My NICU Baby). Some ways to use a journal to help you feel closer to your baby could include:



- **Write a letter to baby.** Tell baby what is going on in life right now, your feelings about being separated from baby, and your hopes and dreams for the future.
- **Document** your baby's changes and developments.
- **Write down a favorite quote** or spiritual passage that provides guidance and reassurance.
- **Write down your questions** for your baby's care team, and anything that circles around and around in your mind about baby's condition.

NOTES:

Being separated from your baby can feel unnatural and difficult.

Remember that **your role in baby's life is very special and unique.**

While the hospital staff is providing your baby with important medical care, **only you as your baby's primary caregiver can fill the role of parent.**

You are helping your baby feel **safe and secure in a way no one else can.**

Remember that you are still serving in that role **even if you cannot be physically present every day.**



Your and your baby's safety come first.

It is okay during this pandemic if you need to take time apart in order to ensure everyone in your family remains safe.



PEOPLE AND RESOURCES THAT CAN HELP:

Mental Health _____

Case Management _____

Community Resources _____

Financial Assistance _____

Peer Support _____

HELPING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COPE WITH HAVING A BABY IN THE NICU

DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Having a baby in the NICU and other children at home poses challenges even when the world is not in the middle of a pandemic. Managing the additional stressor of COVID-19 can be extremely difficult for families with NICU babies.

Here are some ways you can **help your children at home cope with the double stressor of having a sibling in the hospital and the COVID-19 pandemic.** Many of the principles related to helping your older children cope with a baby in the NICU are the same ones that can help them cope with COVID-19.



DURING ANY TRAUMATIC SITUATION, SOME OF OUR MOST BASIC NEEDS MUST BE MET:

- **Coping with the unknown:** It's hard to feel safe when you don't know what will happen. This is true for both your baby's NICU stay and the COVID-19 pandemic. Coping with the unknown is incredibly stressful, but can be made more bearable by **talking about what we do have control over** - and sharing the burden together in loving and supportive relationships. This is true for children and adults.
- **Physical safety:** Explain that the reason that you can't visit the NICU together or as often is that the hospital is keeping things safer for the babies, families, and staff.



Remind your children that the baby is getting the care they need from professionals in the NICU.

Even though it's hard to be separated, the NICU is a safest place for the baby to be right now. Similarly, reassure your children that you and your family are all well and taking precautions to remain healthy. When the baby is ready to come home you will take care of them and the baby.

Explain to your children all the things you are doing to keep your family and our community safe, like washing our hands (for at least 20 seconds with soap and water), covering our coughs and sneezes, and staying home as much as we can. Remind children that if they get sick you will take care of them. Tell that that if you get sick people will help you.

- **Emotional safety:** A first and essential step involves sharing honest, accurate, and developmentally appropriate information about the NICU and about COVID-19.

Kids can generally sense when there's a secret and often will not talk about something they think is off limits. Giving them **information** and the **opportunity to ask questions** and **talk about their thoughts and feelings** allows them to understand what is and isn't happening.

When things are unknown or unsayable **children often fear the worst**. This is why they need to talk things through in a safe space with a loving and comforting caregiver. Even the youngest children can understand that the baby was born too early, with a problem that needs special attention (cardiac, or other surgical problem) and they need time and medical help to get well enough to come home.



If the baby is very sick, you can tell siblings that you're not sure what will happen but that the baby is getting everything they need to help them get better to get better. **Our job is to do everything we can to make sure the baby knows we love them** - no matter what happens.

Similarly, **provide information about COVID-19 that is based on facts**. Choose where you will receive your information (CDC, NIH, WHO, AAP) and share the information that helps your child understand the symptoms, transmission, and how to take preventive measures.

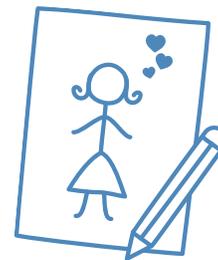
Check in with your children regularly to see how they are feeling and what new thoughts or questions they have about the NICU and COVID-19.



Your kids may need extra love, reassurance, patience, and gentleness right now. So will you. This is not easy. We will all have a hard time. It's ok if you're feeling angry, frustrated, and sad. It's also ok to have times when you feel happy. **Do what you can to be a little extra gentle with yourself and everyone around you during this difficult time.**

There are lots of ways to help your children at home feel connected to the new baby. Ask your NICU staff if there are ways to have virtual visits. **Ask if you can FaceTime with your baby from home** so your family can see, talk to, and read stories to the baby. The voices babies hear in utero can be comforting to them during the NICU stay.

Another option for older children is to **draw a picture** for the baby and send it to your NICU in a plastic ziploc bag (that can be disinfected as needed), or send **black and white photos** in plastic bags for the babies over 32 weeks to see their family members while helping with their eye development during this time.



CAREGIVERS NEED CARE TOO

DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Healthcare providers are used to working under challenging, high-pressure conditions, but you now face extraordinary circumstances at work, at home, and in the world at large.

You're worried about the safety of your patients, your family, and yourself. **These concerns are real, appropriate, and expected.**

At a time when so many things are out of our control it's helpful to identify the things we can control even when the rest of the world feels uncertain.

It is more important than ever for you to care for yourself.

The way you do this may look radically different from what you did in the past. You may need new strategies.



HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR STAYING GROUNDED DURING THIS UNIQUE TIME:



PHYSICAL

Good health habits are critical.

Protect your sleep routines. Maintain good nutrition and hydration. Get sunlight and fresh air. It will help your body stay on track.

Keep moving!

Walk your dog. Take a movement break at work. Try a new online exercise class. Physical activity is an essential tool for managing stress and regulating moods.



EMOTIONAL

Breathe.

Our breath is the only stress response we can control. Slow down and pay attention. Meditation and yoga are great ways to practice being aware of your body's needs.

Practice self-compassion.

Now is not the time to remodel your house or learn a new language. Maintaining the status quo is more than enough!



SOCIAL

Build a support system.

Look for ways to stay connected with friends and family, whether near or far. Show love by both giving and getting help.

Teamwork is key.

Talk with coworkers. Nurture those bonds. Your colleagues may be in the best position to understand the pressures you're facing.



ENVIRONMENTAL

Create predictability.

Embrace familiar routines that help you restore a sense of normalcy and stability.

Re-center.

Make time to reflect - and rejuvenate. Create physical and virtual spaces where you can surround yourself with the sights, sounds, and smells that ground you.

Find more resources at nationalperinatal.org/psychologists

NNNP is a program of the National Perinatal Association.



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