

The National Network of NICU Psychologists: Support Mental Health Needs in the NICU and Beyond

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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.



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united mission to optimize care for infants and their families in NICU settings through direct family involvement, staff support, research, education, and social justice and equity. This network was unofficially established in 2012 following the “Hynan Calls,” hosted by psychologist Michael Hynan, Ph.D. (Saxton et al., 2020). At this stage, Stephen Lassen and Chavis Patterson (co-chairs for approximately seven years, 2011~2018) volunteered to help organize the budding collaboration between eager NICU psychologists under the mentorship of Mike Hynan (2011–current) and the late Cheryl A. Milford (2011~2020).

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In 2019, the NNNP was officially formed as the current organization working under the parent organization, the National Perinatal Association (NPA), striving to be the leading voice and resource for NICU mental health services across the country, led by co-chairs Allison Dempsey and Sage Saxton (2019–2022). As an organization,

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Values and Beliefs

The NNNP operates under core values and beliefs:

- 1) Psychologists have unique training and skills to optimize medical, socioemotional, and neurodevelopmental outcomes for NICU infants and families.
- 2) Psychology services should be integrated into every NICU in the United States.
- 3) Implementing evidence-based, targeted interventions to improve parental, familial, and infant mental health is critical to each child and family’s long-term health and well-being.
- 4) National collaboration among NICU psychologists is essential to state-of-the-art education, clinical research, policy development, and change advocacy.

NNNP Initiatives and Contributions:

The NNNP is a busy organization actively working to contribute to training, scientific literature, and direct patient care. In the past, group members have come together to publish peer-reviewed articles and cutting-edge book chapters outlining clinical care and psychotherapy interventions for NICU families. One specific area of focus has been addressing traumatic stress in the NICU setting. Members additionally partnered to write a resource book for behavioral health clinicians in neonatal and perinatal settings, offering guidance, direction, and understanding regarding the practice of NICU psychology. During the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the group worked closely with NPA to create support resources for NICU mental health clinicians and families, available on the NPA website. The materials included guidance for parent-infant bonding, coping with the hospitalization during a pandemic, and support for caregivers in this context. Furthermore, the training and education arm of the NICU has launched a series of educational webinars for psychologists and trainees interested in practicing in the NICU setting.

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Under the present leadership of co-chairs LaTrice L. Dowtin and Elizabeth Fischer (2022–current), the NNNP continues to have an active agenda for education, research, and advocacy while keeping a running focus on social justice and equity. Currently, the NNNP is working on completing a NICU mental health roadmap to support families through the NICU journey. The advocacy group is actively completing work on an advocacy toolkit that guides clinicians and administrators on their path to developing a NICU psychology program at their institution. The training and education members continue to put out webinars and other training opportunities for membership, focusing on psychology trainees early and transitional career psychologists to help them gain specialized training and consultation in NICU and perinatal mental health. During the annual NPA conference, a retreat is held for psychologists, providing networking, training, and time to develop shared projects further. The NNNP has had an increasing presence in scientific presentations at the NPA conference through platform and poster presentations.

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As we look to the future, our focus is on expanding our reach by welcoming new members and continuing our important work through collaboration between members of our organization and other medical and mental health advocacy organizations in infant, postpartum, and perinatal mental health. Together with NPA, we will continue mentoring trainees and those new to the field of NICU mental health to expand the field of clinicians and researchers, improving the care and outcomes for babies and families who share the NICU journey.

Reference:

1. Saxton SN, Dempsey AG, Willis T, Baughcum AE, Chavis L, Hoffman C, Fulco CJ, Milford CA & Steinberg Z. Essential knowledge and competencies for psychologists working in neonatal intensive care units. *J Clin Psychol Med Settings*. 2020;27:830–841. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10880-019-09682-8>

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