

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.



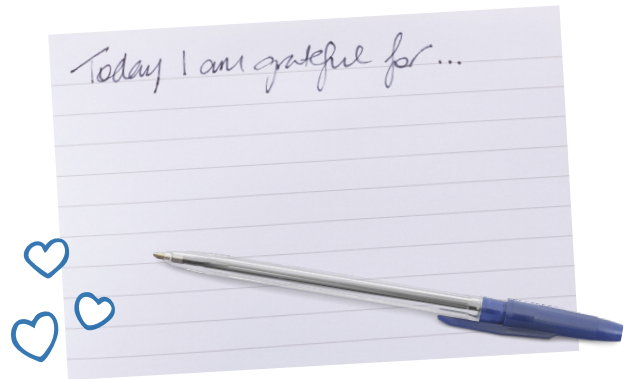
MY SELF-CARE GOAL:



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 _____