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What You Can Do to Support and Bond with Your Baby in the NICU

Parenting in the NICU often feels like you are a visitor to your own child. You're not. You're a parent! Talk with your baby's care team about opportunities to spend hands-on time with your baby and to step into your role as parent, but be sure to let your baby set the pace for your time together. And don't force or push yourself to do too much just because you feel you should. You must rest, eat and recharge to be able to care for your new little one.

Activities you can do with your baby may include:

- Giving baby a bath
- Changing your baby's diapers
- Taking baby's temperature
- Weighing him or her
- Participating in therapy sessions (such as with feeding specialists or developmental therapists)
- Engaging in kangaroo care
- Breastfeeding, pumping milk and bottle-feeding
- Holding your baby's hand
- Stroking his or her head, although providing a gentle, consistent touch to baby will be the most reassuring.
- Talking and singing to him or her; be sure to allow baby periods of undisturbed sleep by keeping noise and bright lights to a minimum
- Listening to music with your baby. Calm music drowns out sounds of alarms, machines, and beeping and creates a haven of peace and healing.
- Leaving your scent with a blanket or small item you have worn close to your body; it's soothing to baby and will help baby recognize you.
- Dressing baby in special clothes and blankets you have brought for him or her.
- Celebrating your baby! Remember you are a new parent, and this is a special time even if it is not what you expected.

Ask your nurse to help you learn to read and respond to your baby

- Learn to read your baby's behaviors, including the signs of distress and how to help baby.
- Learn how to read the heart-rate and other monitors being used in the NICU.
- Learn what the breathing or oxygen alarms mean and when you should and should not be concerned.



Support4NICUParents is a program of the National Perinatal Association
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- Attend morning rounds, where your child's progress is presented to the medical team and plans for the day are developed. Feel free to add your opinion about how your baby is doing, and to bring up any concerns or questions you may have.
- Keep the NICU environment as clean as possible and remember to wash your hands and/or use the hand sanitizer provided.

Capture the moments

- Keep a journal and take lots of pictures.
- Tape pictures to the isolette or decorate the incubator if allowed by NICU staff.
- If your baby is in a private room NICU, decorate your baby's room to make it feel more like home.

Seek Support

- Turn to other parents in the NICU to share experiences; you can provide each other with mutual comfort.
- Talk to your NICU's social worker about parents' support groups, where you can share your feelings, worries, and triumphs together.
- The hospital's chaplain also might be able to provide you with support and even a shoulder to cry on; don't hesitate to ask for spiritual support if this is important to you.
- Pay attention to your *own* needs and those of the rest of the family, particularly your other kids.
- Ask if your facility NICU has resources to provide support for your older children so they can learn about the NICU and what their baby sibling is experiencing.

Ask questions... if there is anything you don't understand, need clarification on, don't agree with or can't remember... ASK. The staff understand that you are overwhelmed and in an emotionally challenging time, and they want to help make you as comfortable and knowledgeable as possible.

--By Jennifer Beatty, LMSW, Program Director at Hand to Hold, Austin, TX