

Guide for Family and Friends During and After a NICU Stay

It is important to understand that a NICU admission can be a very emotional, and sometimes traumatising time for new parents. We have created a guide based on research with other families, that can help assist you in supporting your loved one after a NICU stay.

01 Check in

Check in with your loved one regularly and ask how you can help them. They may appear to be fine, but sometimes they may need to talk to someone. They may also take longer to respond than what is normal for them, please be patient.

02 Provide help

If you are in a position to do so, offer practical help, especially when the baby is still in the NICU and there are other children or family members at home. It is a very difficult time for families when having to split time between the NICU and home. Also, if mum has had a caesarean section, offer to help with things at home so she can avoid strenuous activities. She may also need someone to drive her places. It may also be helpful to volunteer to be the 'communicator' for the parents, by offering to communicate to other friends and family. Finally, don't assume that there is someone already helping.

03 Encourage reaching out

Be aware of topics that may be distressing. Parents who have experienced a traumatic birth and NICU stay may be sensitive to things like the doctors, hospitals, other parents and babies. This may bring up feelings of guilt, shame, sadness, anxiety, anger etc. If this occurs, the parents may need to leave a situation, so be prepared and understanding if this occurs.

04 Understand

Understand and consider the following about post-traumatic stress relating to birth and NICU stays:

- The parents were likely not prepared for a NICU admission, and it may have been very traumatic for them
- Trauma can look different for different people, and parents who have had a traumatic experience need compassion, kindness and care
- The parents may need time and space to heal
- The parents may need to talk about what happened to them (see below for a guide on helpful things to say)
- The parents may not know what they need, but asking if they need support can be helpful

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What you can say

Helpful things to say:

- “It’s not your fault”
- “Try to be easy on yourself during this time”
- “Yes this is scary”
- Acknowledge how hard the experience was for the parents (“that sounds like it was so hard”)
- If you are unsure, you can even just say “I don’t know what to say”
- Sometimes they might just want you to listen, you don’t need to say much at all
- Seek more information

Avoid saying:

- “At least...” (anything starting with “at least” is likely not helpful)
- “You’ll forget this soon”
- “There are others who had it worse”
- “What bad luck”
- “Try not to think about it”
- “When are they coming home?”
- “But they’re ok now/they’ve caught up”
- Dismiss or ignore the parents’ feelings
- Give advice based on your experiences
- Compare their baby or experience to others
- Offer your own experience unless they ask



For more information on birth trauma and NICU admissions, visit the Embrace website, PANDA or the Australasian Birth Trauma Association.

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