

Bonding with Your Baby

What to expect

This handout provides guidance on bonding with your baby in the NICU. It explains that bonding looks different for every family and offers suggestions that may work for you and your baby. It also highlights support services available to help families navigate this challenging time.

What will bonding with my baby look like?

You may not have been able to share your baby's first few minutes of life in the way you had hoped. When this happens, many parents worry that they have lost their chance to bond with their baby. Your chance to bond is **NOT** lost if your birth experience was different than you expected. There are many ways to bond while in the NICU.

Bonding will look different for every family and every family member. It is a very emotional and personal process. How you bond with your baby also depends on physical factors, such as your baby's gestational age and stability, and your own health. Some babies cannot be touched or held right away, while others can. Ask your baby's care team what is best for your baby at each phase of their growth and development. Parenting and bonding will evolve as your baby progresses.

How can I help with the bonding process?

Care for Yourself

Take care of yourself so you can take care of your baby. Drink water and eat regularly. Rest and sleep as much as you are able. Take deep breaths and check in with your emotions. Connect with supportive friends, family, and other parents in the NICU. Your baby knows you and responds to your energy. It helps them most when you are calm, relaxed, and well rested.

Touch

Ask your nurse about the best ways to touch your baby. The answer will depend on your baby's gestational age and medical condition. You may start by sitting quietly by your baby's bedside. Later, your baby may hold your finger in a tiny fist. Or you may comfort your baby by "containing" them with your hands. Touch your baby without stroking, tickling, or tapping. When your baby is ready and able, hold your baby, ideally skin-to-skin (kangaroo care). If holding or touching is not possible, let your baby know you are there by placing your hands close to your baby. Talk quietly to them or read a book. They can smell, see, and hear you when you are near them.



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"The hardest thing is eating and resting, to take care of yourself. Those things need to be done even though you don't want to leave the NICU."

-Wyatt's Mom



"The very first day of his life, we began a ritual that we have continued his entire life – we read books to him every day. It gave me something to do that felt like I was connecting with him, that felt like I was doing something."

-Layne's Mom

Kangaroo Care

During kangaroo care (or skin-to-skin), your baby is held against your bare chest. Your baby will be naked except for a diaper, held upright on your chest, and covered by blankets to stay warm. Usually, kangaroo care is done for 2 to 3 hours at a time. Talk with your nurse about the best timing for you to do kangaroo care. For parents, this experience helps with bonding and attachment, breastmilk production, and emotional well-being. This is special care that only you can provide for your baby. For your baby, this experience helps regulate breathing, heart rate, oxygen levels, and temperature. They sleep better, which leads to improved growth. It also can improve their digestion, help fight infections, and promote brain growth.

Other Ways to Bond

Being in the NICU can be hard. Often your life outside of the NICU makes it difficult to visit. While we hope you visit your baby as often as possible, the staff understand that you must also take care of yourself and the rest of your family. If you can't visit, call your baby's nurses for updates. If the nurse is busy and unable to answer the phone, call back a short time later.

Bring items from home, like a special blanket, pictures of family members, or other small items to decorate their room. (See "Room Decorations" in Code of Conduct.)

Leave items that have your smell on them close to your baby's space (like breast pads you have used). Please always check with the nurse first if you want to put something in your baby's bed, for safety and infection reasons.

Supporting You

Many parents find the NICU overwhelming, confusing, and frightening. All NICU parents can receive help from someone who is able to provide extra support and help you and your family with the stress of having a premature or sick baby. Your nurse can help you connect with these specialists.

Social Work

Social workers can help with worry about your baby's health, or emotions around having delivered early and having to leave the hospital without your baby. They help with post-partum mood disorders (also called post-partum depression or The Baby Blues) or if you are experiencing domestic violence.

Social workers can also assist with financial or insurance concerns and can provide information about housing and community services.

Spiritual Care Services

Spiritual Care providers offer spiritual and emotional support, listening with openness and understanding. They respect each person's spiritual, cultural, and personal perspectives and do not impose any religious beliefs. They can also offer prayers or blessings for your baby.



"Kangaroo care is so important. It helps the babies thrive. My husband did kangaroo care, too. There were days when Kylie was held for many hours. This made me feel close to her."

- Kylie's mom



"I wish someone had told me that even with all of the hard days and sadness, there is truly something wonderful and magical about the NICU. It can be a really wonderful place."

-Lucy's Mom

Palliative Care Services

Palliative Care providers support you and your family emotionally, psychologically, and practically. Palliative Care includes talking about what is most important to you and your family, about what your hopes and concerns are as parents. Palliative Care providers support your family when it is time to make important care decisions.

Child Life Specialist

Our Child Life Specialist has a background in Child Psychology and Child Development. If you have other children, she can support you as you help them cope with having a sibling in the NICU.

You Are Not Alone

Having a baby in the NICU can feel overwhelming and isolating, but you are not alone. Many other parents have experienced similar emotions, worries, and challenges during this time. It's normal to feel a mix of fear, sadness, and hope as you navigate your baby's journey. Below are quotes from other NICU parents who have shared their experiences. You are part of a community of parents who care and understand.



Time to Grow

"I always felt guilty having my baby alone in a hospital room, but please know that your miracle needs time to grow. The best way they can do this is through sleep, just as they were doing in the womb."

-Kylie's mom

Overwhelming Emotions

"Holding your baby for the first time is an overwhelming experience, no matter the circumstances surrounding the moment. Joy, comfort, hope; each moment generates a different emotion."

-Mom of NICU baby

Caring Connections

"Although having a baby in the NICU was emotionally taxing, we found the staff at UWMC absolutely incredible. They became people we could lean on and trust, an extension of our family. They cared for my heart and helped support me emotionally through the toughest time in my life."

-Kylies Mom

First Moments

"The first time I laid eyes on our babies was a very surreal and emotional moment. My babies looked so frail and lifeless with tubes and wires all over them. These babies I couldn't keep inside me were now my reality."

-Timmy and Tessie's Mom

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Neonatal Intensive Care Unit: 206.598.4606