

NEONATOLOGY TODAY

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Family Centered Care: The Silent Struggle: Why We Must Talk About the Toll the NICU Takes on Dads

Alex Zavala

“When a baby is admitted to the NICU, the world seems to stand still. Everything else fades as parents are thrown into a whirlwind of alarms, tubes, and medical terms they never imagined learning. Moreover, while so much attention—rightfully—goes to the fragile newborn and the emotional weight mothers carry, there is another story that too often goes untold: the toll it takes on NICU dads.”

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newborn and the emotional weight mothers carry, there is another story that too often goes untold: the toll it takes on NICU dads.

This is a crisis we need to talk about.

NICU dads are expected to be the strong ones. The providers. The protectors. They hold their partners when they break down, manage work, care for other children, and advocate fiercely for their baby, all while bottling up their own fear and pain. However, the truth is that *they are breaking too*.

The emotional and physical strain can be overwhelming. Studies show NICU fathers are at increased risk for anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, and even PTSD. However, few are asked how they are doing. Fewer still feel safe saying they are not okay.

This silence is dangerous.

When we do not create space for NICU dads to talk, grieve, cry, and connect, we leave them isolated in one of the hardest seasons of their lives. And when dads are hurting, families suffer. Marriages struggle—mental and physical health decline. Long-term engagement—at home and in care—can be impacted.

That is why *we need to break the silence*.

Organizational Partners



We need hospitals and NICUs to recognize and support NICU dads, not just as visitors, but as parents and partners in their child's care. We need community programs and peer groups that invite dads in and remind them they are not alone. Moreover, we need families, friends, and professionals to ask the hard question: "How are *you* doing?"



"We need hospitals and NICUs to recognize and support NICU dads, not just as visitors, but as parents and partners in their child's care. We need community programs and peer groups that invite dads in and remind them they are not alone."

Disclosure: This work is supported by an educational grant from Chiesi Inc. USA and a Seed 1 Partnership Award from Stanford Impact Labs.

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Every NICU dad's story matters. Their health matters. Their presence matters.

So let us have the conversation. Let us build awareness. Moreover, let us make sure no NICU dad walks through this journey unseen or unheard.

Because strong does not mean silent. Furthermore, NICU dads deserve to heal as well.

Learn more, find support, or join the movement at thenicudad.com.

*BUILT FOR THIS- The NICU Dad Pushup Challenge

100 pushups a day for the number of days your baby was in the NICU

Former NICU dads are nominating other NICU dads for the challenge on social media

Open to everyone, they can also dedicate their pushups to honor their NICU warrior.

"We will also offer an option for those who cannot do a pushup to include planks, walking, jumping jacks, sit-ups, or any other form of physical activity daily."

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"BUILT FOR THIS" NATIONAL PUSH-UP CHALLENGE LAUNCHED TO SPOTLIGHT STRENGTH OF NICU DADS

In honor of the often-overlooked strength of fathers in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), The NICU Dad is proud to announce the official launch of **Built for This: The NICU Dad Push-Up Challenge!**

This nationwide campaign calls on current and former NICU dads—and anyone who supports them—to complete **100 push-ups a day for the same number of days their baby spent in the NICU.**

“This isn’t just about fitness,” said **Alex Zavala, NICU dad of two and founder of The NICU Dad.** “It’s about acknowledging the invisible weight dads carry when their newborns are fighting for their lives. Each push-up is a moment to reflect, release, and raise awareness for a journey that’s rarely talked about.”

The Challenge Details:

What: 100 push-ups per day

When: Kicks off on Father’s Day, June 16, 2025

Duration: As many days as your child’s NICU stay

Purpose: Raise awareness, build community, and honor the emotional and mental health challenges of NICU dads

How to Join: Share your progress on social media using the hashtag **#BuiltForThisChallenge** and tag **@thenicudad**

NICU DAD RESOURCE GUIDE



NICU DAD PODCAST



FAMILY-CENTERED CARE
TASKFORCE

BUILT FOR THIS

THE NICU DAD PUSH-UP CHALLENGE

WHAT IT IS
A powerful challenge to spotlight the resilience of NICU dads and raise awareness for the unique mental, emotional, and physical journey they face.

HOW IT WORKS
Complete a daily set of 100 pushups for the amount of days your baby was in the NICU. Share your challenge on social media and nominate other NICU dads.

WHY JOIN
NICU dads bear invisible emotional, mental, and physical burdens. This challenge aims to honor their strength and foster community.

WHO CAN JOIN
Everyone is welcome to participate! NICU dads, moms, family members, staff, friends, and advocates are all encouraged to join this challenge.

Share your video or story to be featured on our NICU Dad Spotlight Series!

THE NICU DAD

#muscles&miracles
#pushwithpurpose
#thenicudadpushupchallenge

Why?

NICU dads carry unseen emotional, mental, and physical burdens. This challenge is designed to recognize their strength and cultivate a sense of community.

- It serves as a meaningful tribute to their resilience while also raising awareness.
- Whether you are a parent, a friend, or simply someone eager to make a difference, this challenge supports NICU families and promotes positivity.

Each push-up symbolizes a step toward compassion. Share your journey, connect with others, and let's build a supportive community. Together, we can make a difference, one push-up at a time.

THE NICU DAD

Participants can sign up, download materials, and access support resources at www.thenicudad.com.

The campaign is expected to draw national attention across healthcare systems, parenting communities, and fitness advocates alike. It provides a **unique opportunity to highlight paternal mental health and family-centered NICU care**—areas too often overlooked in traditional narratives.

In addition to the daily push-up challenge, The NICU Dad will feature **real stories from fathers around the country** and offer opportunities for others to donate, get involved, and support NICU families through this empowering initiative.

“This challenge is our way of saying: NICU dads, we see you. And we’re pushing with you,” Zavala said.

About The NICU Dad:

Founded in 2018 by Alex Zavala, The NICU Dad is a nonprofit platform dedicated to supporting fathers who have experienced a NICU stay. Through storytelling, peer mentorship, podcasting, advocacy, and community initiatives, The NICU Dad raises awareness for the emotional and physical toll that NICU journeys take on fathers.

For media inquiries, interviews, or partnerships, please contact:

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www.thenicudad.com



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