THE POWER OF "HOW ARE YOU?"

Strengthening Support for Fathers and Non-Birthing Parents in the NICU

By: Cameron Boyd, MD

Featuring: Michael Swain- Veteran NICU Father

DISCLOSURE

- I have no financial disclosures or conflicts of interest related to the content of this presentation.

DISCLAIMER

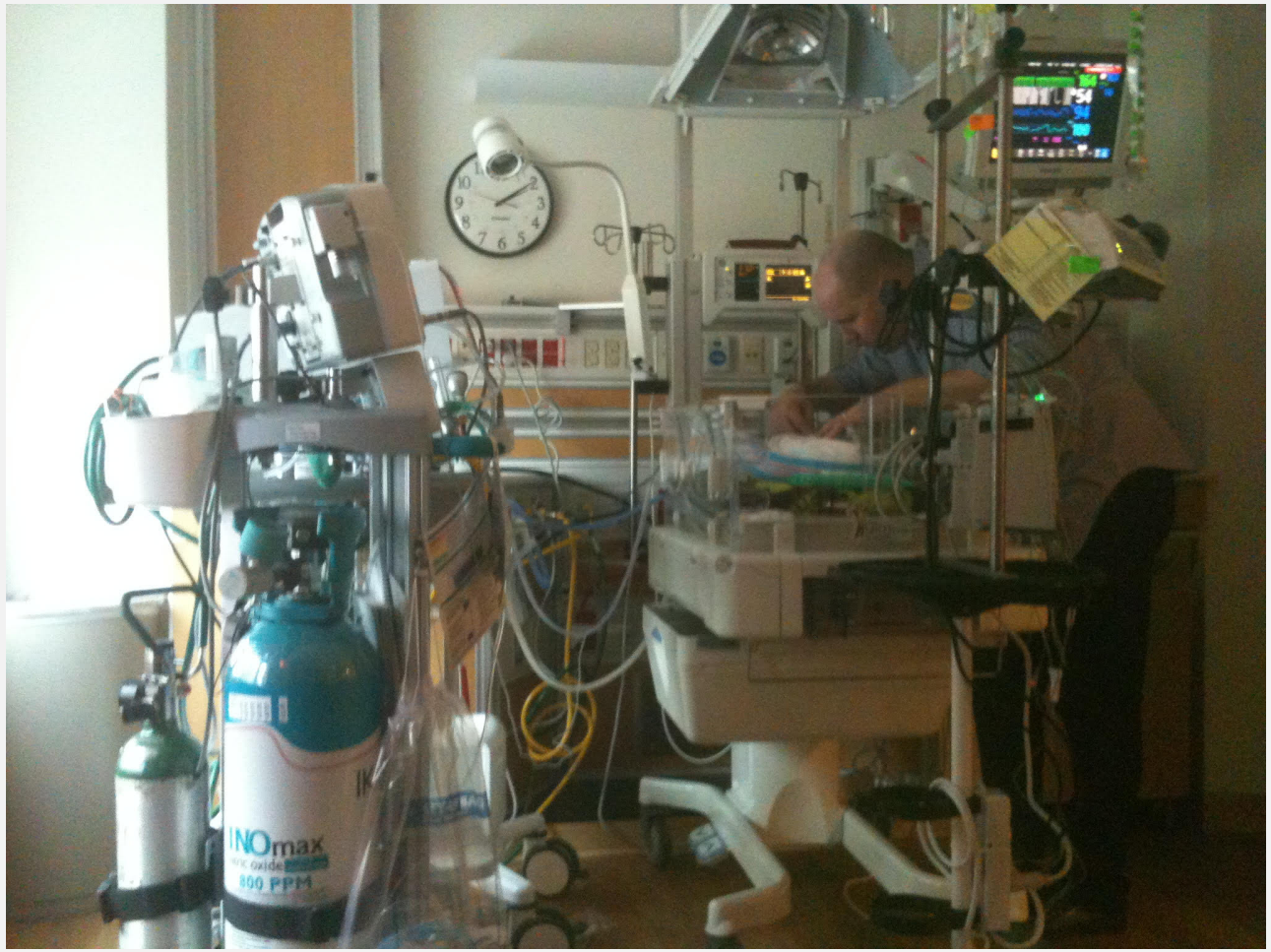
- In this presentation, the terms “father” and “dad” are used interchangeably. While this talk focuses on fathers in the NICU, we recognize that all parents and caregivers deserve support and are essential partners in family-centered care.

OBJECTIVES

- Understand the needs and perspectives of fathers in the NICU.
- Learn strategies to engage fathers and non-birthing parents at the bedside.
- Explore the importance and structure of a NICU Dads' Group.

- LA Times

- LA Times



- LA Times

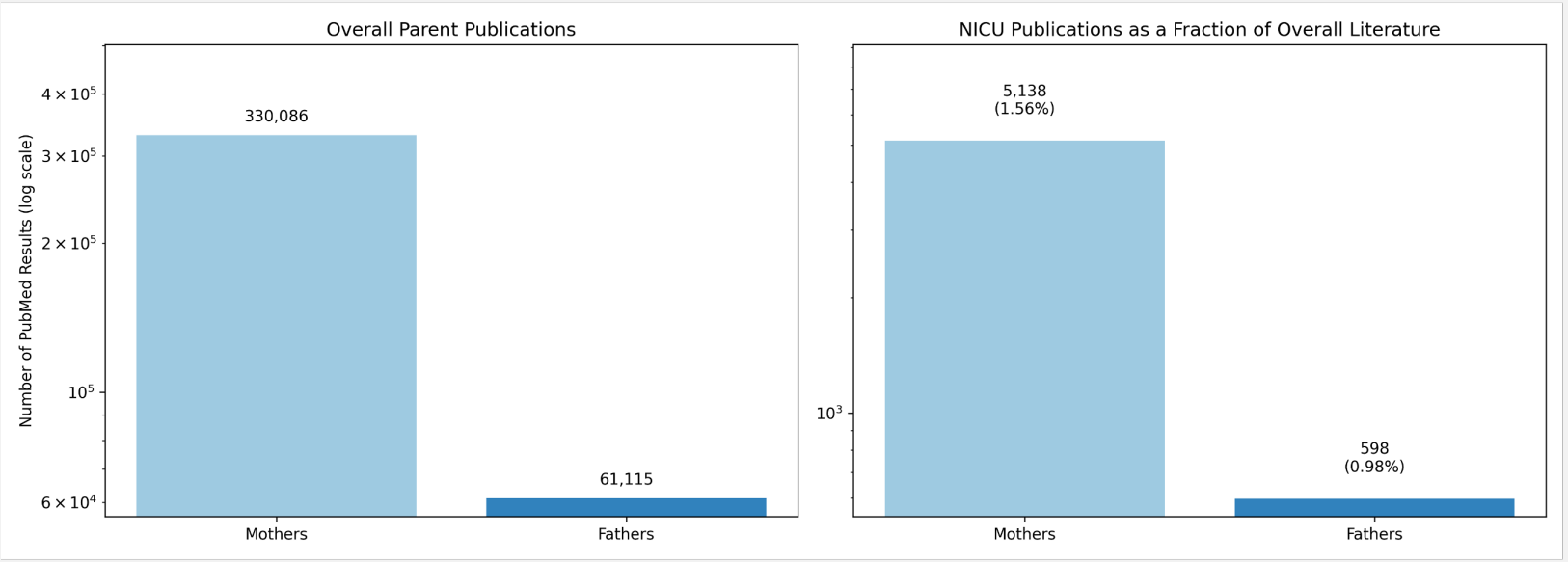
- LA Times

FATHERS' UNIQUE NICU CHALLENGES

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE NICU

- About 40-50% of NICU **parents** experience clinically significant levels of depression, anxiety, and trauma.

GAPS IN NICU RESEARCH



… WHAT ABOUT THE DADS?

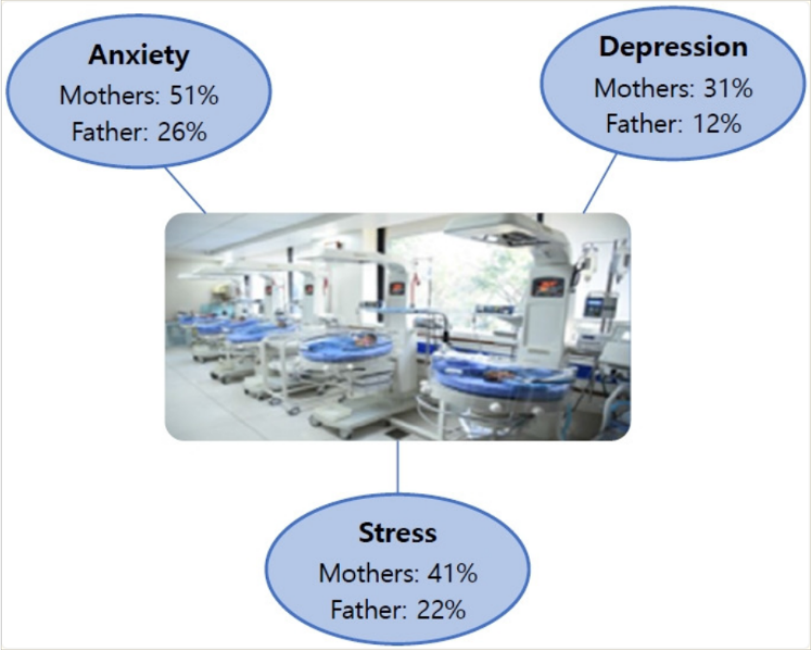
https://www.allprodad.com/4-ways-to-deal-with-dad-guilt/

WHAT DADS ARE GOING THROUGH

- Feeling sidelined in caregiving roles.
- Guilt, helplessness, loss of control, fear.
- Balancing roles: partner, provider, parent.
- Caring for their own well-being.

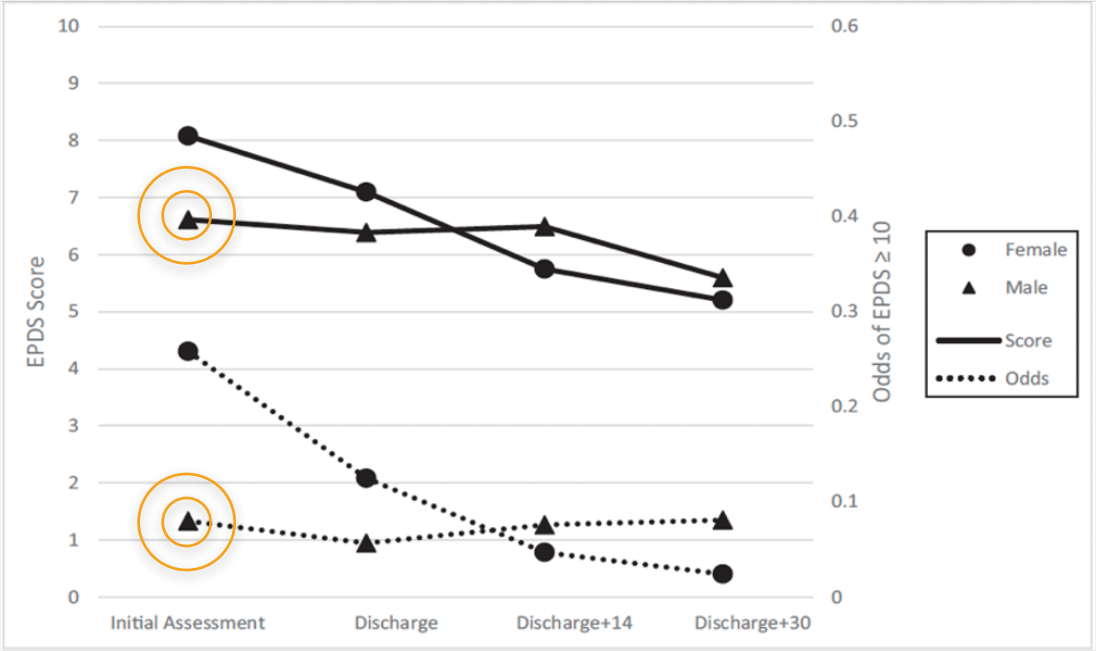
Noergaard, Betty et al.

FATHERS' MENTAL HEALTH



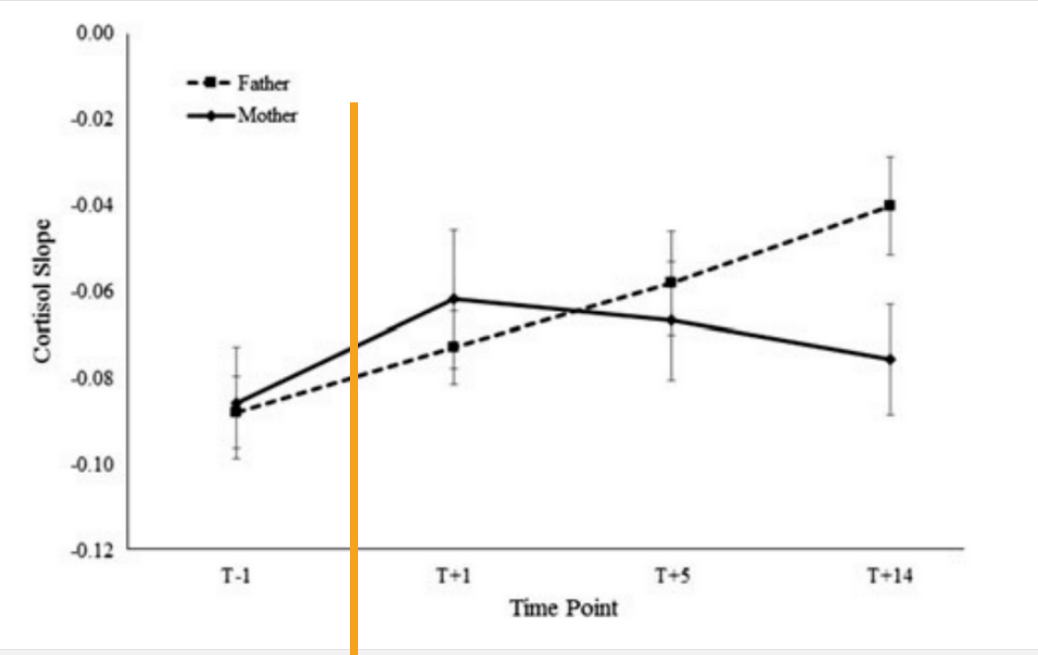
Shetty, Asha P et al.
Koch, Sabrina et al.

FATHERS' MENTAL HEALTH



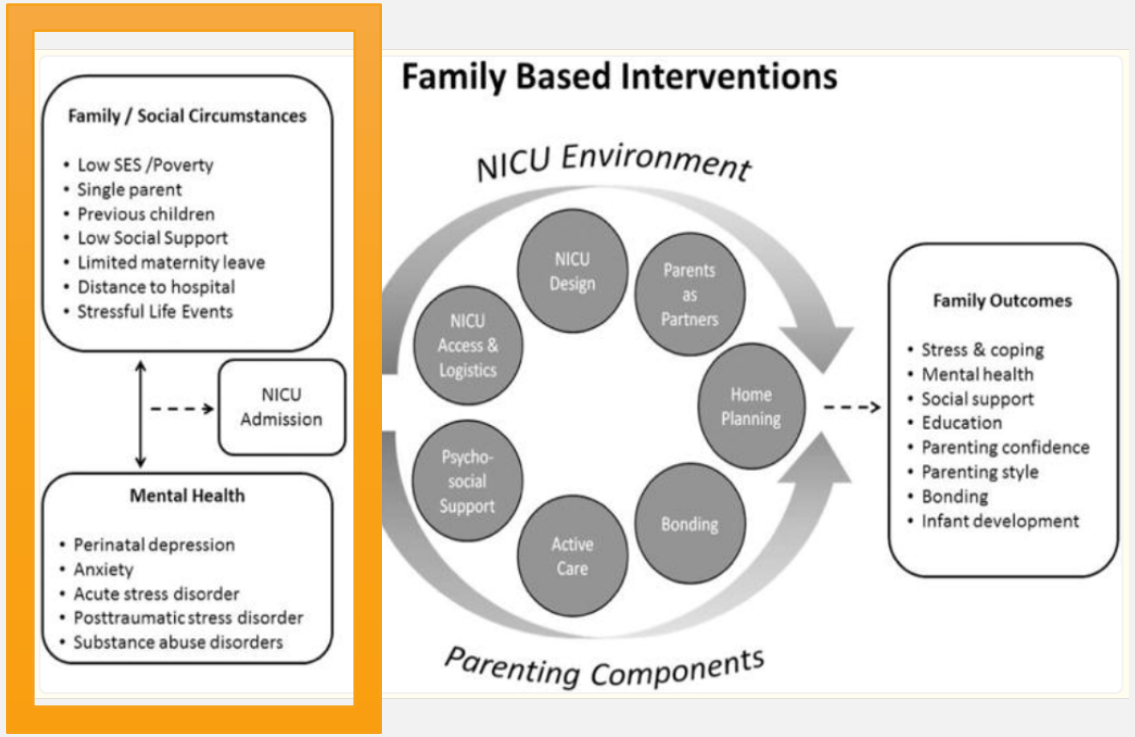
Garfield, Craig F et al.

FATHERS' MENTAL HEALTH



Garfield, Craig F et al.

ADDRESSING STRESS IN THE NICU



Lean, Rachel E et al.

LONG-TERM IMPACT ON FAMILIES

- NICU stress affects relationships and bonding.
- Long-term mental health implications.
- Long-term behavioral implications for the family unit and child.
- Family-centered care can reduce negative outcomes.

Manning, Alexander N.

LONG-TERM IMPACT ON FAMILIES

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- Long-term mental health implications
- Long-term behavioral implications for the family unit and child.
- Family-centered care can reduce negative outcomes.

FINANCES

Manning, Alexander N.

FINANCIAL IMPACT ON FAMILIES

> J Pediatr. 2023 May:256:53-62.e4. doi: 10.1016/j.jpeds.2022.11.038. Epub 2022 Dec 9.

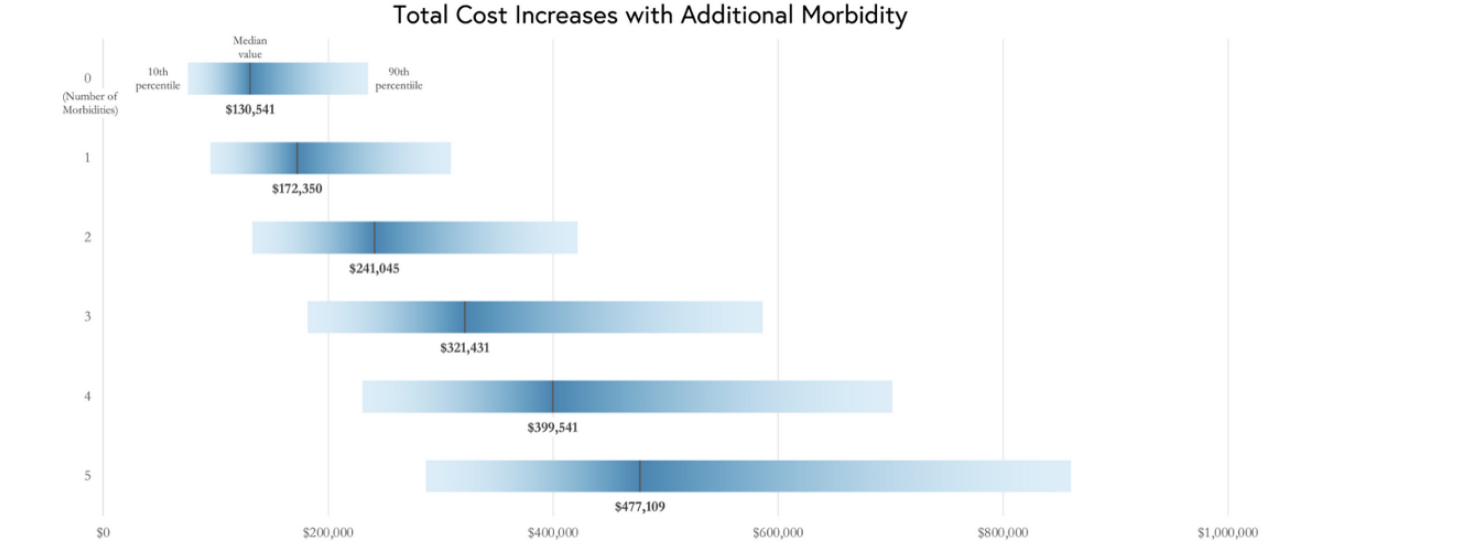
Healthcare Costs of Major Morbidities Associated with Prematurity in US Children's Hospitals

Kuan-Chi Lai [1], Scott A Lorch [2]

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 36509157 DOI: 10.1016/j.jpeds.2022.11.038

FINANCIAL IMPACT ON FAMILIES



Study sample consists of a cohort of infants born preterm without major congenital anomalies (birth weight between 400 and 1999 grams and gestational age from 24-to-30 weeks) admitted in the first three postnatal days between January 1, 2009, and December 31, 2018. Data are drawn from the Pediatric Health Information System (PHIS) and includes 19,232 patients from 30 children's hospitals across the United States.

FINANCIAL IMPACT ON FAMILIES

- Medical Bills
- Lost Income and Missed Work
- Travel, Lodging and Childcare
- … and the list goes on.

PARTNERING WITH DADS

PATERNAL BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

- Work commitments and societal expectations ("Masculinity")
- Self expectations ("Superman mentality")
- Limited resources tailored for fathers
- **The medical team**

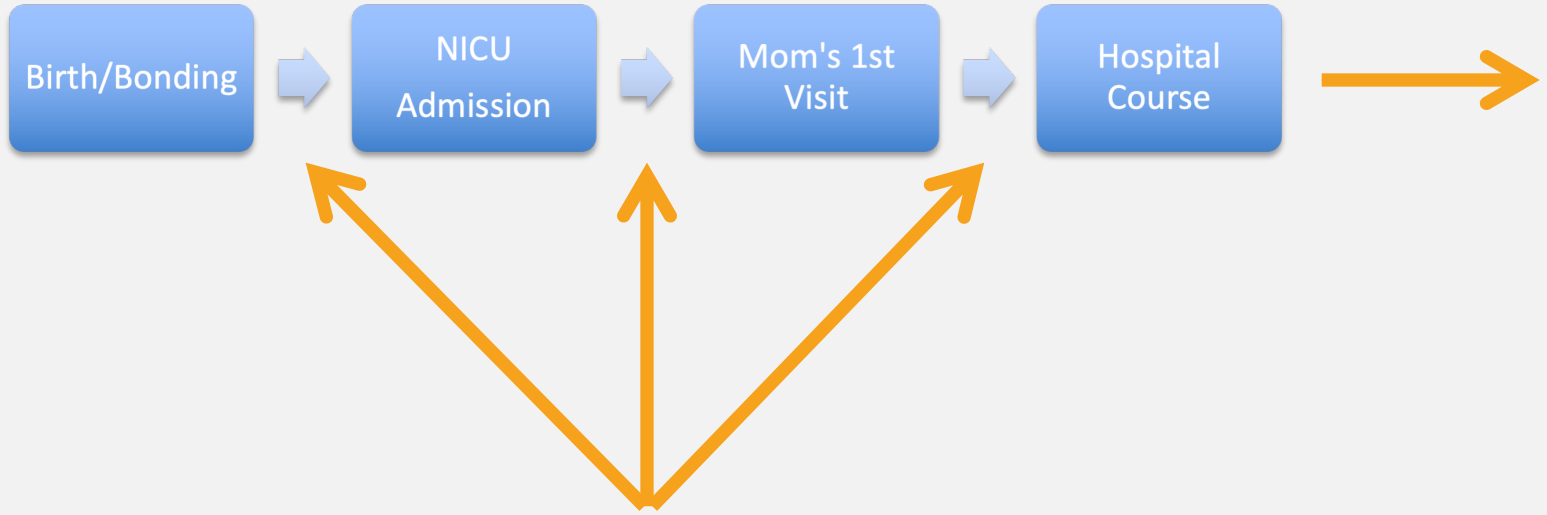
Noergaard, Betty et al.

WHAT FATHERS SAY THEY NEED

- Clear, direct information
- Emotional support and inclusion
- Opportunities for hands-on care and support
- Practical support

Adama, Esther Abena et al.
Merritt, Linda et al.

NON-BIRTHING PARENT ENGAGEMENT



PATERNAL ENGAGEMENT: SKIN-TO-SKIN

- Decreases paternal stress.
- Strengthens father-infant bonding.
- Encourages early caregiving involvement.

Varela, Natalia et al.
Yildirim, Fatma et al.

ENHANCING PATERNAL ENGAGEMENT

- **Personal strategies:**
  - Simple eye contact.
  - Reflecting on and minimizing biases related to gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.
  - Encouraging early participation in care routines.
  - Facilitating open communication.
  - Offering flexible care policies.

Ondusko, Devlynne S et al.

ENHANCING PATERNAL ENGAGEMENT

- **Bidirectional educational support:**
  - Provide resources tailored to fathers (e.g., pamphlets, videos, workshops)
- **Creating a welcoming environment:**
  - Educate staff to recognize and address paternal needs
  - Pictures/images of fathers
  - Inclusive language
  - Flexible visitation policies
  - NICU design

LeDuff, Lawrence D 3rd et al.

NICU DADS' GROUP

PURPOSE OF NICU DADS' GROUP

- To provide a **dedicated space** for fathers navigating the complexities of having an infant in the NICU.

STRUCTURE OF NICU DADS' GROUP

- 📅 Monthly Meetings (In-person in NICU)
- ⏰ ~1 Hour, Casual Atmosphere with refreshments
- 📍 Central Location in NICU
- 🤝 Fathers-only, Supportive Environment

STRUCTURE OF NICU DADS' GROUP

Table 1. NICU Dads' Group Meeting Agenda

Agenda Item	Description	Purpose
Welcome & Introductions	Members share family updates and NICU experiences.	Normalize the NICU experience and practice storytelling.
Guest Speaker (Optional)	A discharged NICU father shares insights from his journey.	Provide inspiration and relatable mentorship from a peer.
Educational Discussion	Facilitator-led topics on coping, advocacy, and paternal mental health.	Share evidence-based strategies tailored to NICU fathers.
Q&A and Support	Open forum for questions, advice, and encouragement.	Offer support in a non-clinical, peer-driven environment.
Closing Reflections	Recap key points and share follow-up materials.	Reinforce community and provide continued access to resources.

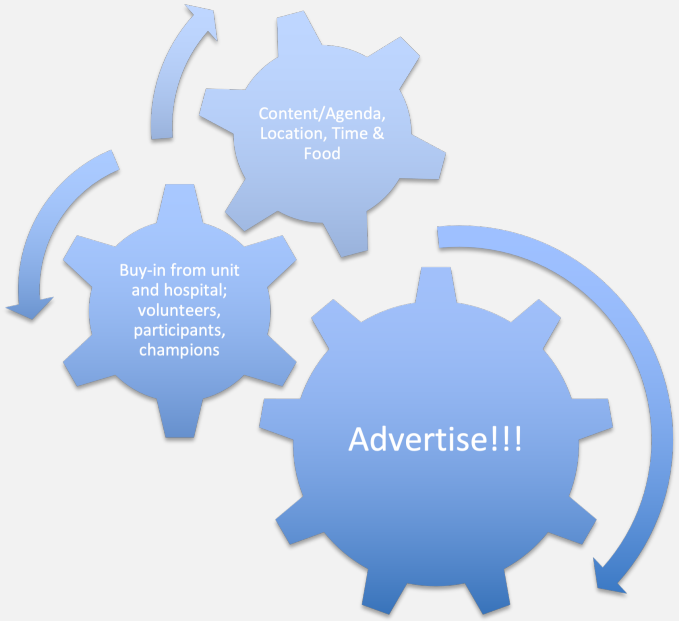
BENEFITS OF NICU DADS' GROUP

- Reduces feelings of isolation.
- Creates sense of community.
- Enhances coping skills and emotional resilience.
- Improves confidence and knowledge of caregiving skills.

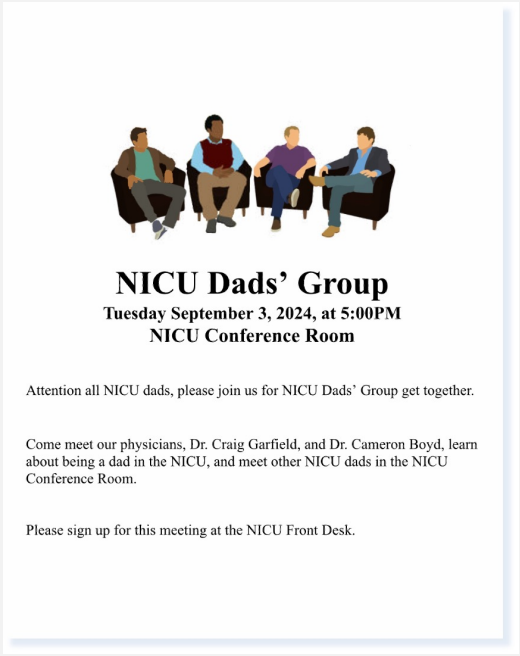
POTENTIAL IMPACT ON CLINICAL OUTCOMES

- **Positive Outcomes:**
  - Improved parental mental health and reduced stress.
  - Strengthened parent-infant bonding.
  - Improved parent-parent relationships.
  - Enhanced collaboration with NICU staff.
- **Long-Term Benefits:**
  - Better developmental outcomes for NICU graduates.
  - Increased satisfaction with NICU care.

ENCOURAGING NICU DADS' PROGRAMS



ENCOURAGING NICU DADS' PROGRAMS



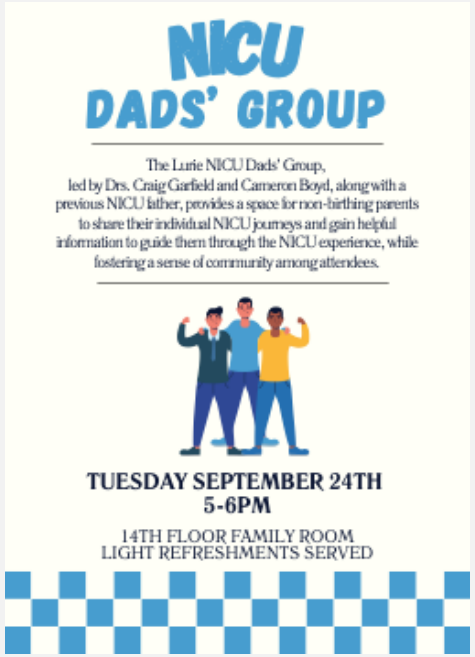
NICU Dads' Group

Tuesday September 3, 2024, at 5:00PM
NICU Conference Room

Attention all NICU dads, please join us for NICU Dads' Group get together.

Come meet our physicians, Dr. Craig Garfield, and Dr. Cameron Boyd, learn about being a dad in the NICU, and meet other NICU dads in the NICU Conference Room.

Please sign up for this meeting at the NICU Front Desk.



NICU
DADS' GROUP

The Lurie NICU Dads' Group, led by Drs. Craig Garfield and Cameron Boyd, along with a previous NICU father, provides a space for non-birthing parents to share their individual NICU journeys and gain helpful information to guide them through the NICU experience, while fostering a sense of community among attendees.

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 24TH
5-6PM

14TH FLOOR FAMILY ROOM
LIGHT REFRESHMENTS SERVED

NICU PARENTS' GROUP:

LITTLE MIRACLES, BIG THANKS

Monday, November 25, 2024
5:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.
Location TBD

Please join us for a special holiday-themed parent group. Come meet with NICU social worker Shira Schwartz and Drs. Craig Garfield and Cameron Boyd for a memorable event. Please sign up at the NICU Front Desk and meet there right before start time on event day.

NICU PARENTS' GROUP:

LITTLE MIRACLES, BIG THANKS

Monday, November 25, 2024

Welcome & Intros	———	5:00 p.m. - 5:20 p.m.
"I am thankful for..."	———	5:20 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.
Holiday Q&A	———	6:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
Fun and Games	———	6:15 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.
Toast	———	6:30 p.m.

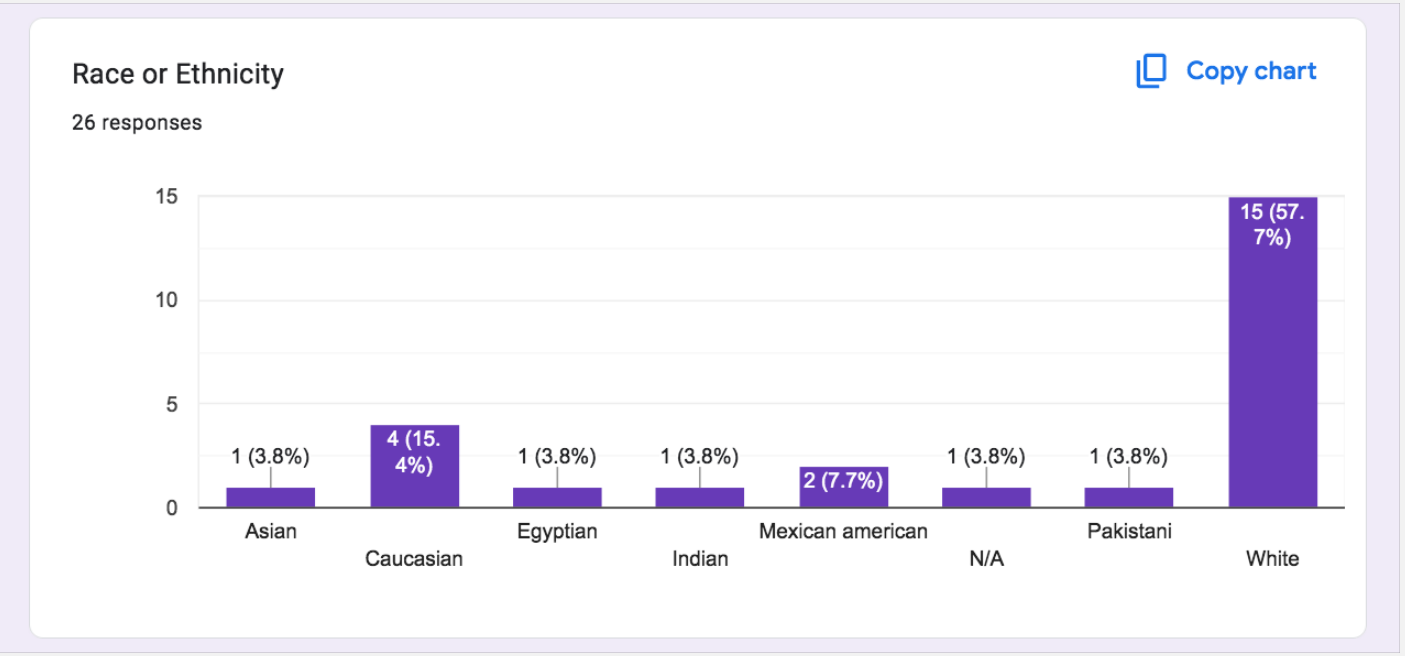
Thank you for joining us to celebrate this holiday season. Wishing you and your family all the best on your NICU journey!

Shira Schwartz, LSW
Craig Garfield, MD
Cameron Boyd, MD

POST-GROUP SURVEY DATA

- A total of 40 responses
- Age ranges from 27 to 48 years old.
- Gestational age at birth: ranges from 23+6 to 39+2.
- Dads have ranged in attendance from one to four times.

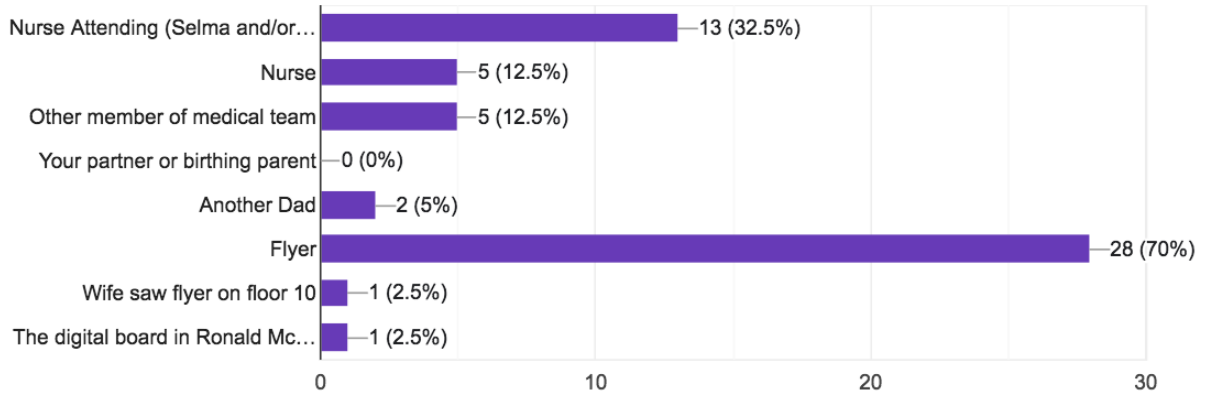
DEMOGRAPHICS



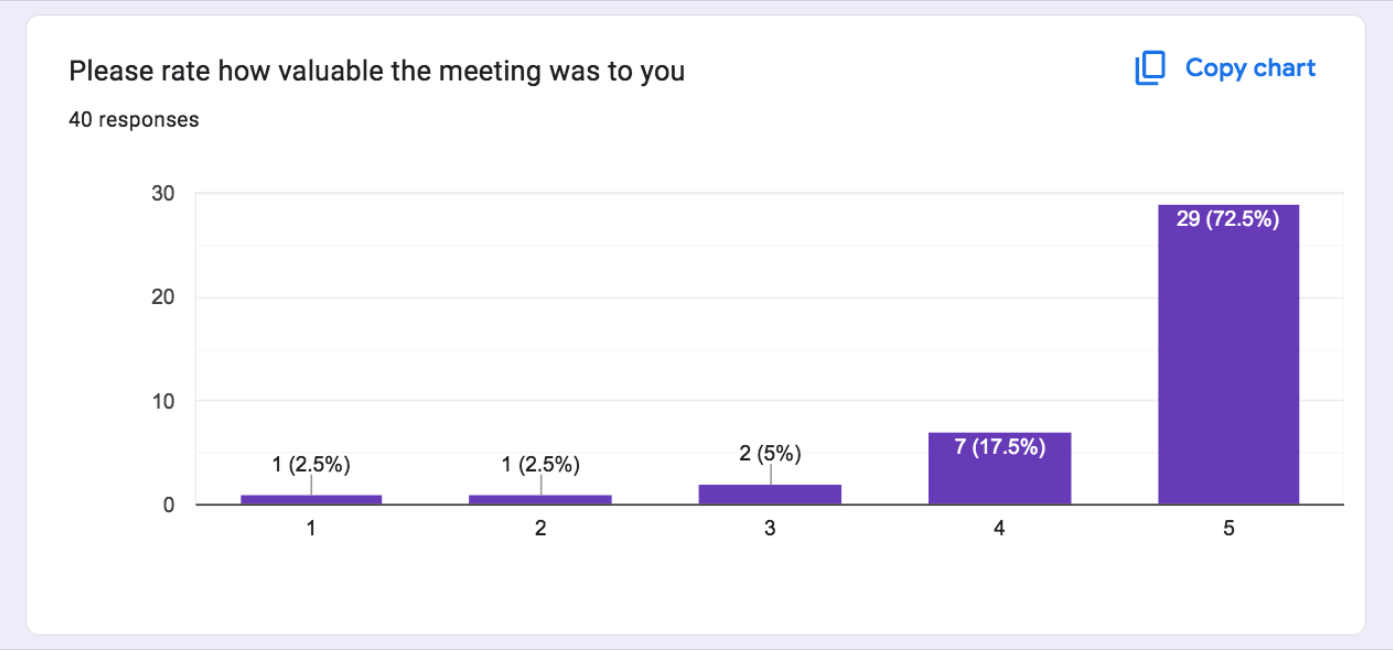
How did you hear about the Dads' Group?

Copy chart

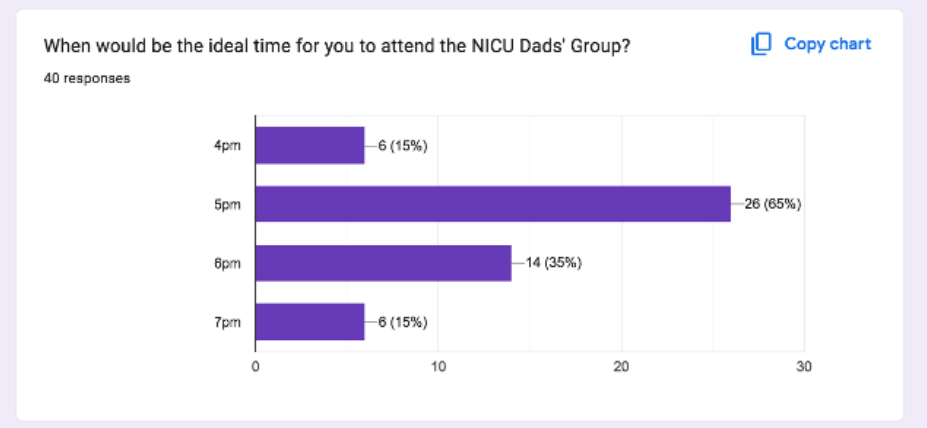
40 responses

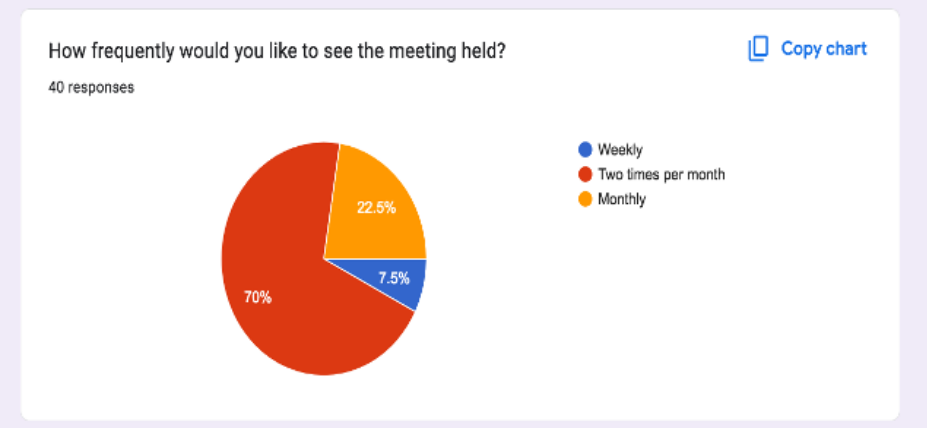


POST-GROUP SURVEY DATA



POST-GROUP SURVEY DATA





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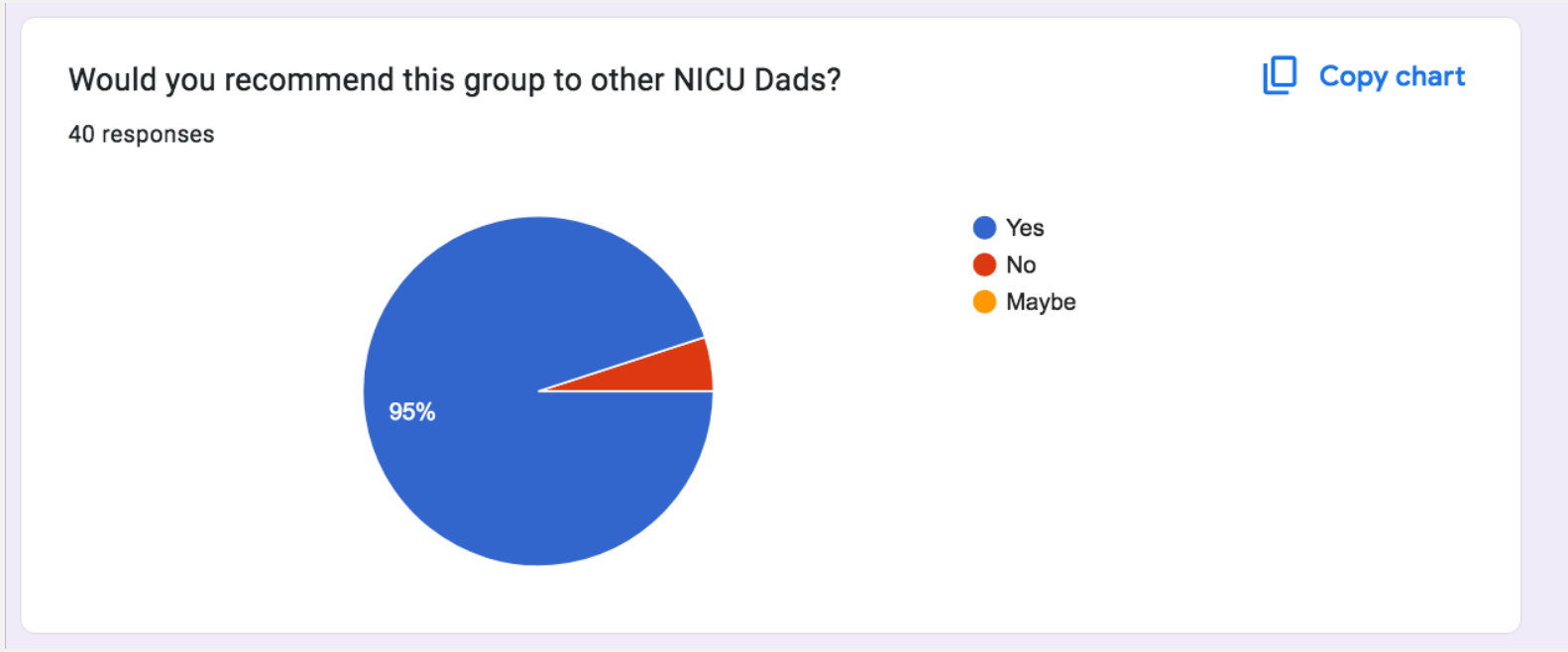
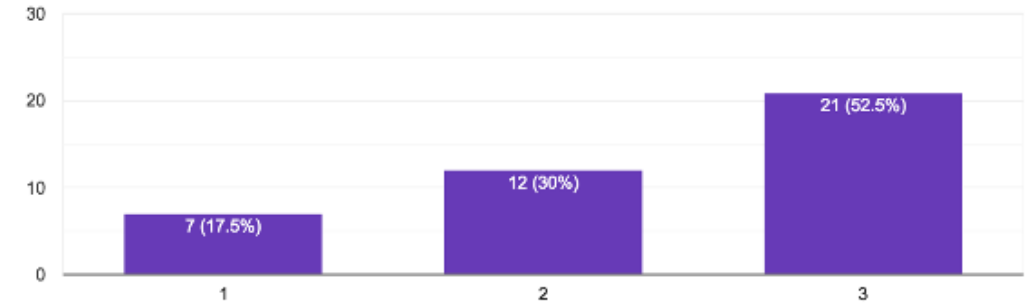


POST-GROUP SURVEY DATA

Before attending the NICU Dads' Group, how knowledgeable were you of paternal skin-to-skin care with your baby?

Copy chart

40 responses



After attending the NICU Dads' Group, how knowledgeable do you feel about paternal skin-to-skin care with your baby?

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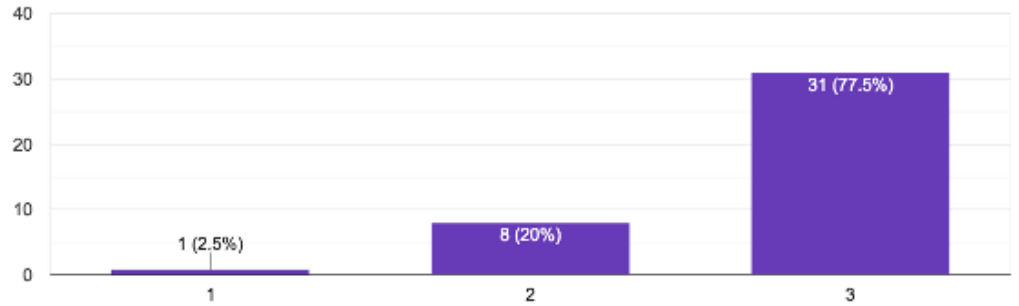
40 responses

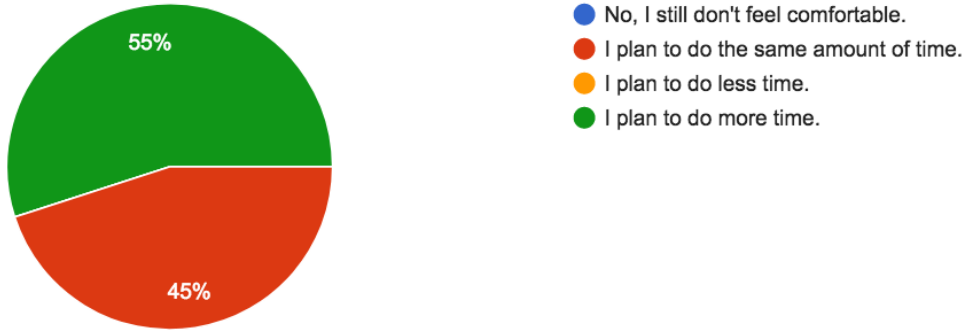


POST-GROUP SURVEY DATA

After learning more about skin-to-skin care in today's NICU Dads' Group, do you plan to make changes to your skin-to-skin care time with your baby?

Copy chart

40 responses



POST-GROUP QUOTES

- *I was hesitant too, but it was the single most helpful thing for me in my journey through the NICU. I felt so alone before, but didn't even realize it. Dads' Group helped me recognize how alone I felt and recognize that I really was not alone.*
- *The best way to support your child and partner is to be all in. You can pay for anything and plan for everything but if you don't show up mentally and emotionally it won't matter if you're just there physically.*

THEMES FROM GROUP DISCUSSIONS

- Shared feelings of anxiety, fear, uncertainty, guilt, helplessness, isolation.
- Desire to be seen and involved.
- Appreciation of the medical team and care received.

DADS' GROUPS IN THE NICU

- 90-minute father group with intervention based on dialogue between fathers and a male healthcare professional.
- Overall themes from study were "Emotional support, encouragement and an enhanced capacity to deal with the situation and with life in the NICU".

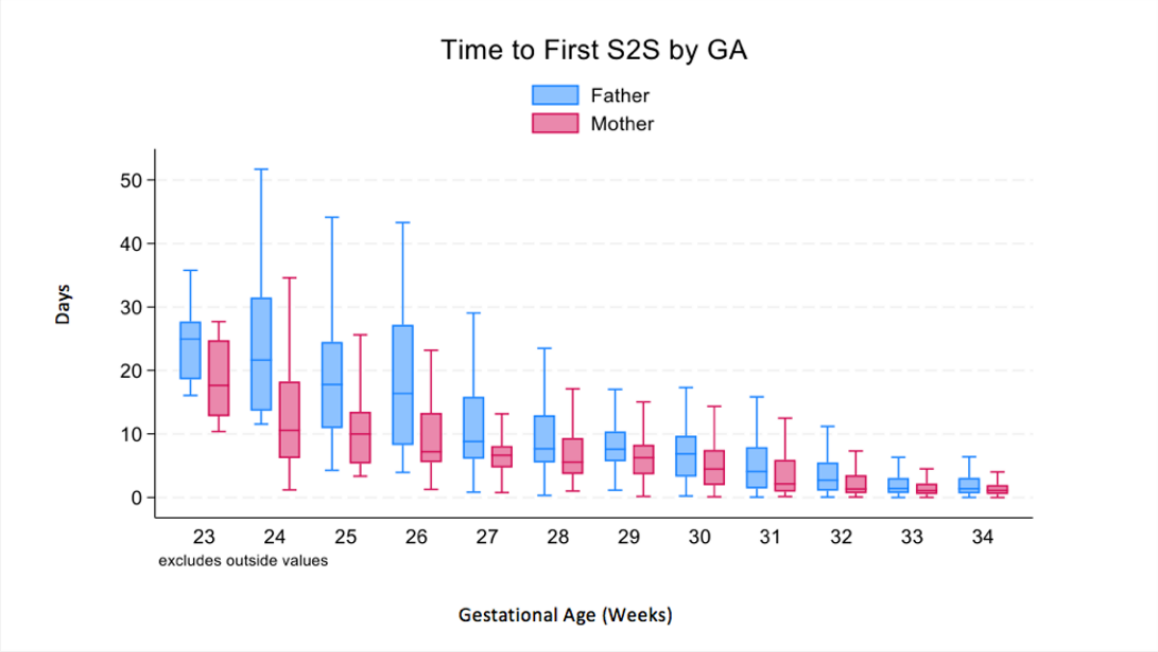
Lægteskov, Tascha Ravn et al.

DADS' GROUPS IN THE NICU: THE POWER OF PEER SUPPORT

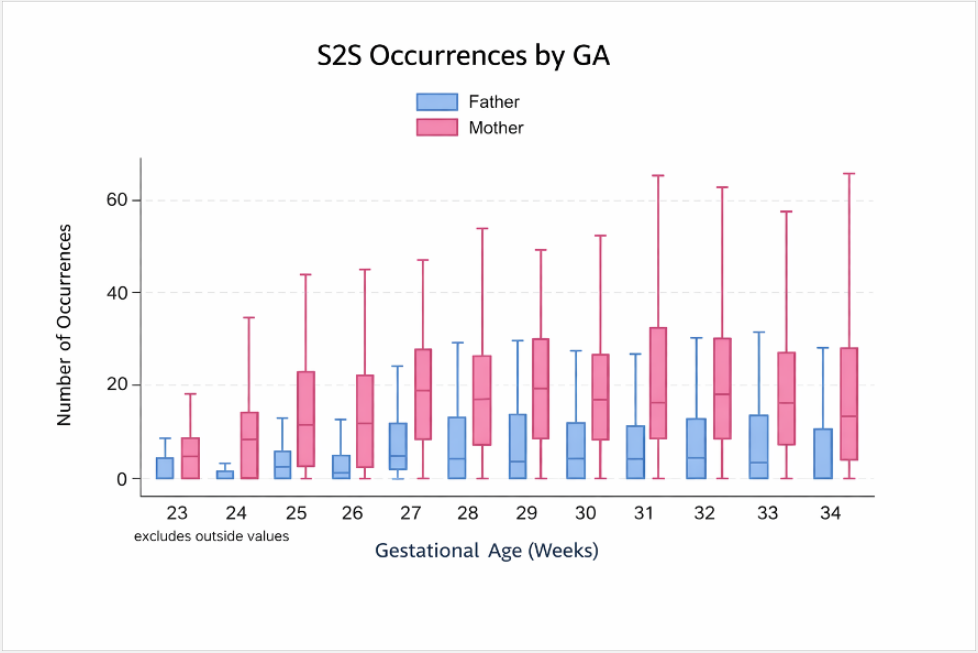
- Role of Peer Support
  - Veteran NICU dads provide encouragement and shared experiences.
  - Creates a non-judgmental space for emotional and practical support.

Hall, S L et al.

PERSONAL RESEARCH



PERSONAL RESEARCH



PERSONAL RESEARCH

Northwestern Medicine
Feinberg School of Medicine

"I Am Not Alone": A Pilot NICU Dads' Group
Supporting Emotional Well-being Through Peer Connection

[1,2]Cameron N. Boyd, MD; [1,3]Craig F. Garfield, MD, MAPP

[1]Division of Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine, McGaw Medical Center of Northwestern University, [2]Division of Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital, [3]Division of Pediatrics, McGaw Medical Center of Northwestern University

Background

Fathers of NICU-admitted infants experience high stress, anxiety, and isolation, yet their needs are often overlooked.[1,4] While maternal support structures are well-established, few NICU programs are designed with fathers in mind.[2,3] To address this gap, a NICU dads' support group was piloted in a high-volume (1,500 annual admissions) Level III NICU.

Objective: To evaluate changes in emotional well-being, coping strategies, and perceived support among participants in a monthly NICU dads' support group.

Methods

Two NICU physicians facilitated a monthly support group for fathers of infants in the Level III NICU. Sessions included light refreshments, introductions, peer sharing, and educational content.
Post-session surveys collected demographic data and feedback on satisfaction, emotional well-being, social support, and coping strategies using Likert scales and open-ended responses.
Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.
Qualitative responses were coded using thematic analysis to identify key emotional and experiential themes.

Results

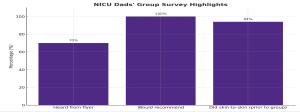
Respondents
- 33 fathers (ages 27–48) attended one or more sessions over 13 months
- Infants' gestational ages: 23–39 weeks

Satisfaction
- **100%** would recommend the group
- **79%** rated it 5 out of 5
- **67%** expressed interest in meeting more than once per month

Emotional Impact
- **94%** had limited stress awareness prior to group participation
- **100%** reported increased awareness after attending

Behavioral Modifications
- Increased focus on self-care
- More frequent exercise
- Improved communication with partners and NICU staff
- **61%** planned to increase skin-to-skin care with their infants

Qualitative Themes
- Connection, validation, emotional relief
- Requests: partner communication tools, strategies to balance NICU and daily life
- Quote: ***"The dads' group was the single most helpful thing in my NICU journey."***



Conclusions

A monthly, physician-led NICU dads' group improved participants' emotional awareness, self-care, and engagement in infant care. This low-cost, scalable intervention may enhance family well-being and could be integrated into standard NICU care. Limitations include a small sample size, single-center setting, and reliance on self-report. Further research in diverse NICU settings is needed to assess long-term impact on families and infant outcomes.

References

1 Koch, Sabrina et al. "Effects of male postpartum depression on father-infant interaction: The mediating role of face processing." Infant mental health journal vol. 40,2 (2019): 263-276. doi:10.1002/imhj.21769

2 Laegteskov, Tascha Ravn et al. "Father Groups in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit: A Supportive Intervention." Advances in neonatal care: official journal of the National Association of Neonatal Nurses vol. 23,5 (2023): 478-486. doi:10.1097/ANC.0000000000001092

3 Merritt, Linda et al. "The Needs of NICU Fathers in Their Own Words: A Qualitative Descriptive Study." Advances in neonatal care: official journal of the National Association of Neonatal Nurses vol. 22,3 (2022): E94-E101. doi:10.1097/ANC.0000000000000934

4 Shetty, Asha P et al. "Prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress among parents of neonates admitted to neonatal intensive care unit: a systematic review and meta-analysis." Clinical and experimental pediatrics vol. 67,2 (2024): 104-115. doi:10.3345/cep.2023.00486

PERSONAL RESEARCH

Northwestern Medicine
Feinberg School of Medicine

Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago

Disparities in NICU Skin-to-Skin Care by Parental Race, Ethnicity and Sex

[1,2]Cameron N. Boyd, MD; [1,2]Susan Slattery, MD, MS; [1,2]Gustave Falciglia, MD, MS; [1,3]Craig F. Garfield, MD, MAPP

[1]Division of Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine, McGaw Medical Center of Northwestern University, [2]Division of Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital, [3]Division of Pediatrics, McGaw Medical Center of Northwestern University

Background

Preterm birth is the leading cause of death in children under five. Skin-to-skin care (SSC) in the NICU is crucial for bonding, thermoregulation, and promoting neurodevelopment in preterm infants.[1,4] However, significant disparities exist in SSC participation across racial and ethnic groups, affecting both mothers and fathers. While maternal SSC benefits and disparities are well-documented, less is known about paternal involvement and how race, ethnicity, and parental sex affect SSC access.[2,3]

Objective: To examine SSC rates across racial and ethnic groups by parent sex over a six-year period, in order to inform strategies to reduce barriers and advance equitable family-centered care.

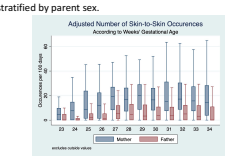
Methods

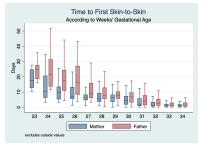
This retrospective study included preterm infants <35 weeks' GA admitted to an urban Level III NICU between 2018 and 2024. Infants with NICU stays <2 days were excluded. Primary outcomes were (1) SSC events per 100 hospital days and (2) time to first SSC. Box plots and histograms were used to visualize outcomes by gestational age and parent sex. Mann-Whitney U tests and linear regression assessed associations with parent sex, race/ethnicity, and GA, adjusting for covariates ($p < 0.05$). Parent sex (mother/father) was extracted from medical records; gender identity data were not available.

Results

- **Sample**: 2,698 infants (GA 23–34 weeks); 44% White, 19% Black, 19% Hispanic, 7% Asian, 10% Other/Unknown
- **Mothers**: Non-white mothers had fewer SSC events (11.8 vs. 19.2/100 days) and longer time to first SSC (2.0 vs. 1.3 days), **$p < 0.0001$**
- **Fathers**: Non-white fathers had fewer SSC events (0 vs. 6.7/100 days) and longer delays to SSC (4.1 vs. 2.3 days), **$p < 0.0001$**
- SSC frequency and timing were associated with gestational age and parent sex (Figures 1 & 2)

Figures 1 & 2 show SSC events and time to first SSC by gestational age, stratified by parent sex.





Conclusions

- SSC differed significantly by race/ethnicity and parent sex.
- These disparities may signal early inequities in NICU family engagement and infant health outcomes.
- Addressing structural and cultural barriers to SSC is key to inclusive, family-centered care.
- Future efforts should explore interventions such as staff training, workflow redesign, and policy change.

Implications

- Improve staff awareness of SSC disparities
- Integrate inclusive SSC education into family-centered care
- Expand SSC access for fathers and non-birthing parents
- Study the physiologic and developmental impact of paternal SSC on preterm infants
- Evaluate SSC's physiologic and mental health effects on parents

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4 "Who Urges Immediate Skin to Skin Contact for Babies Born Prematurely | UN News." United Nations, United Nations, news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130602.

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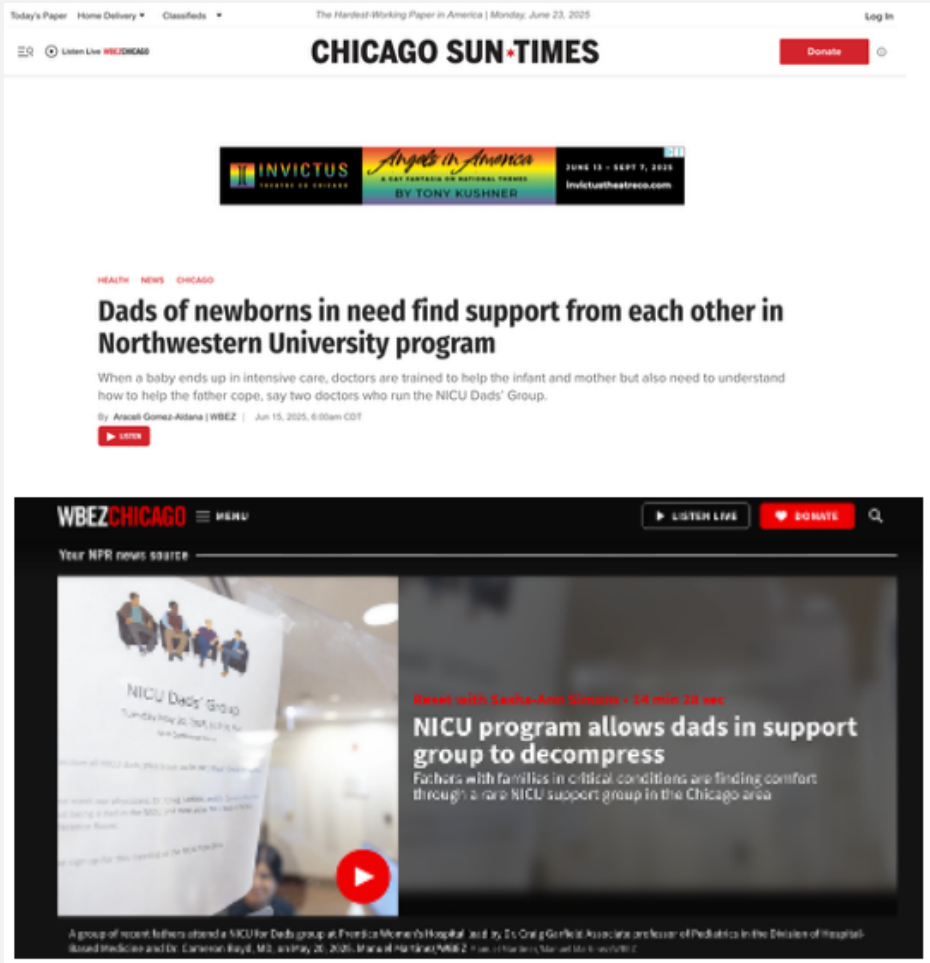
DADS' GROUP MAKING THE NEWS!



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HEALTH NEWS CHICAGO

Dads of newborns in need find support from each other in Northwestern University program

When a baby ends up in intensive care, doctors are trained to help the infant and mother but also need to understand how to help the father cope, say two doctors who run the NICU Dads' Group.

By Araceli Gomez-Aldana | WBEZ | Jun 15, 2025, 6:00am CDT

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NICU program allows dads in support group to decompress

Fathers with families in critical conditions are finding comfort through a rare NICU support group in the Chicago area

A group of recent fathers attend a NICU for Dads group at Prentice Women's Hospital and by, Dr. Craig Garfield, Associate professor of Pediatrics in the Division of Hospital-based Medicine and Dr. Cameron Boyd, M.D. on May 20, 2025. (Manuel Martinez/WBEZ)

SUMMER READING

Chicago Tribune

'A tale of two Mike Madigans' on stand

NICU support system for dads

00 Marines begin LA deployment

TAKE ACTION

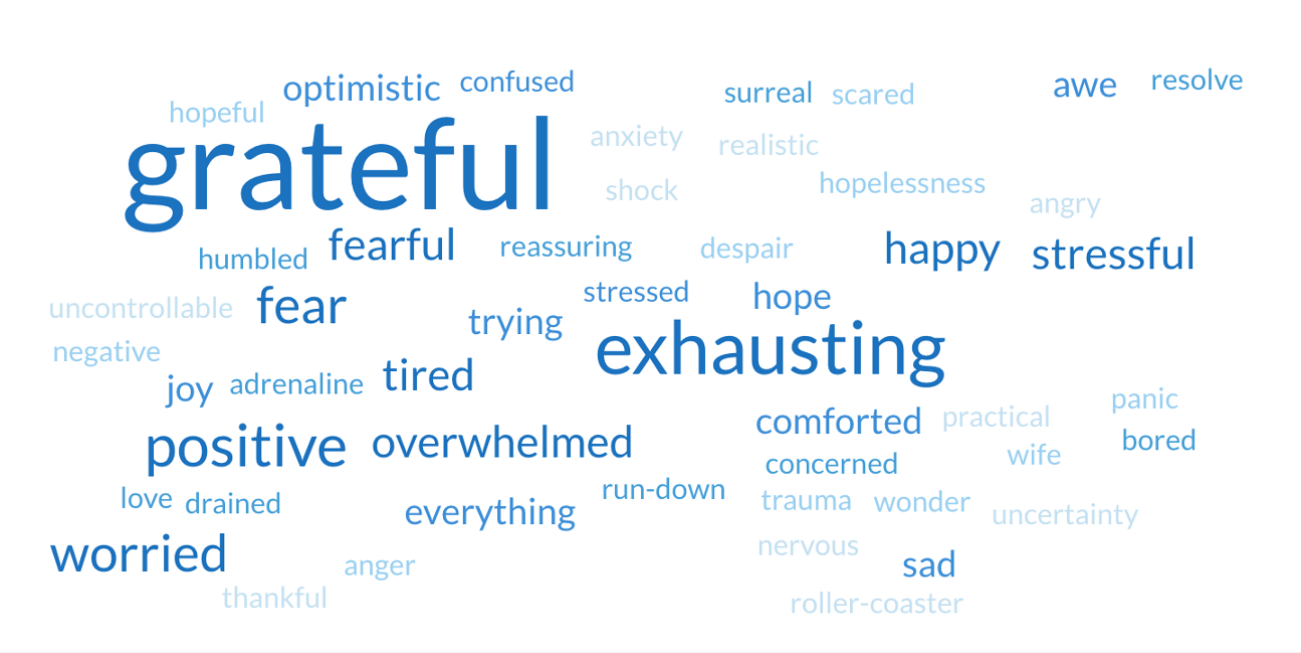
CALL TO ACTION

- **Clinicians:**
  - Engage fathers as active partners in care.
- **Leadership:**
  - Champion the development of dad-focused support initiatives.
  - Create father-friendly policies.
- **Everyone: Ask, 'How are you?'**

“Nobody ever asks me how I am doing. They only ask how the baby and my partner are doing.”

-NICU Dad

HOW ARE YOU?



- Reflections Shared in Post-Group Surveys

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