

The Unseen Parent: Insights into Inclusive NICU Care

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Introduction/Background

In the U.S., 3.66 million infants were born in 2021. An estimated 9-13% of liveborn infants are admitted to a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU)

Family-centered care is the gold standard for NICU care

Research indicates that family-centered care is not consistently practiced to its full extent

CDC.gov; Pineda et al. (2023)



Background and Significance

- Most research about family-centered care in the NICU has focused on birth mothers
- There is a paucity of research regarding NICU nurses' perceptions of partnering with fathers or other non-birth parents in family-centered care
- To address this gap, this study sought to describe NICU nurses' perceptions about partnering with fathers and other non-birth parents in family-centered care in the NICU





In Victorian times, family-centered care was a natural extension from birth. Mothers were considered the best nurses. Separation from her infant was discouraged.





As premature infants' survival increased, separation from the mother was common.

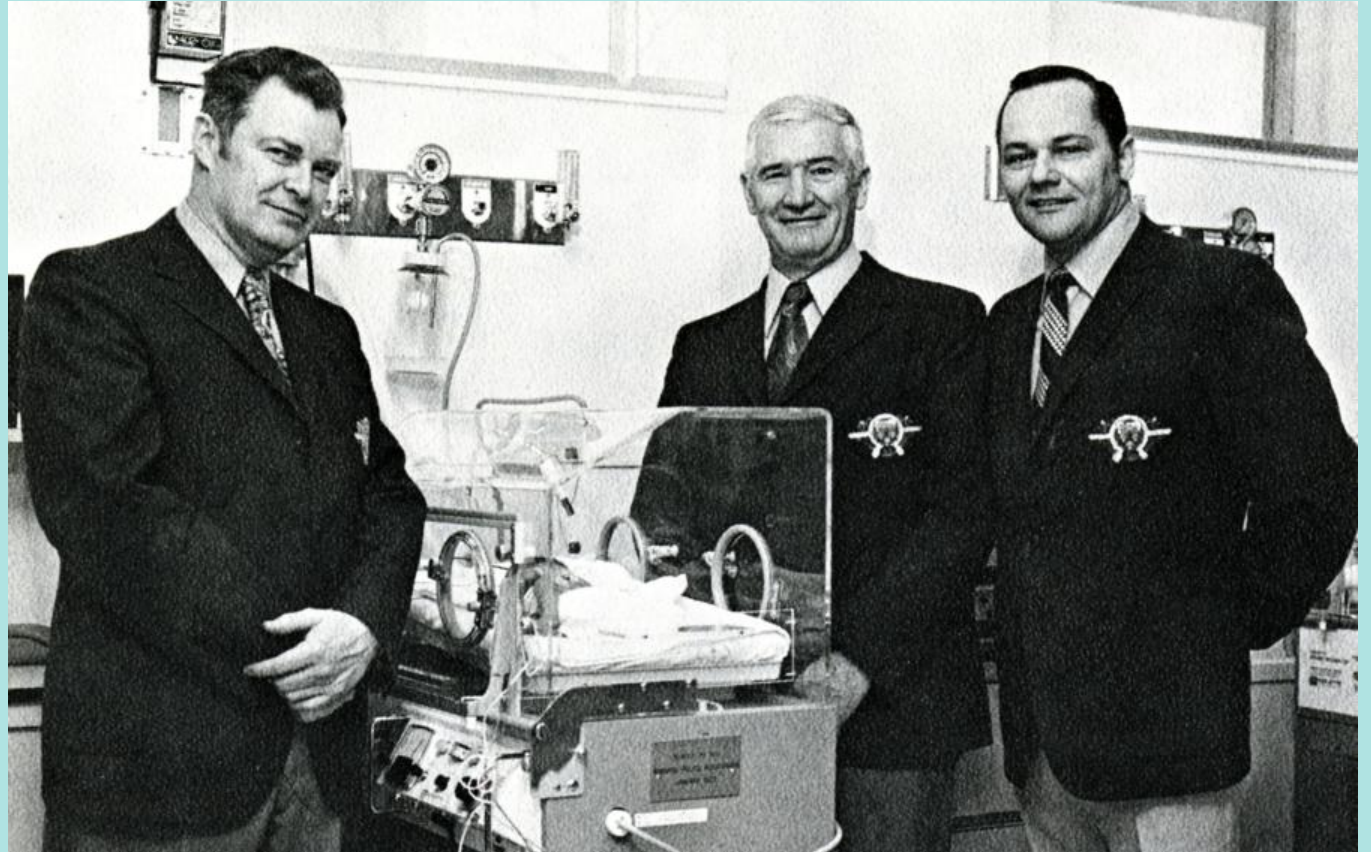


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Parents were banned from visiting their infants in premature nurseries.

It was thought that germs from the parents were contributing to infants' mortality.

- Over the years, parents were allowed more often in the NICU
- They were not considered important to the infants' care
- Primary focus was on medical care



Evolution from Visitor to Care Team Member

- Traditionally, NICU infant care was in purview of neonatal nurses
- Parents viewed as visitors
- Over time we have slowly embraced parents to be present and engaged in care



BUT we have
not fully
incorporated
family-
centered care
into our
practice yet



[Nurse Placing Newborn Baby Girl In Incubator High-Res Stock Photo - Getty Images](#)

Family-centered care in NICU

It supports the parent-infant attachment, parental presence and active participation in the daily care and decision-making.



Why is Family-Centered Care (FCC) so Important?

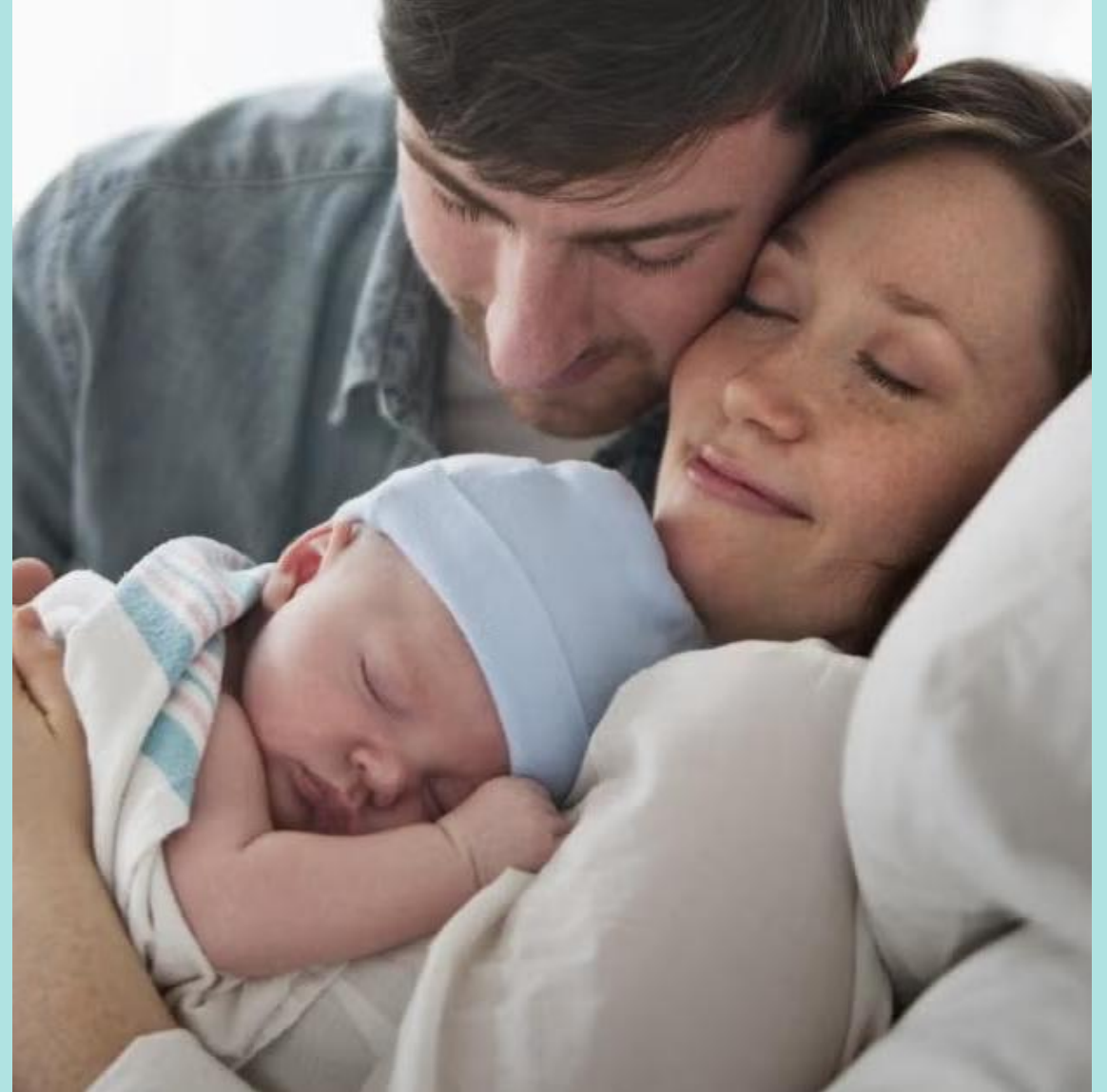
- NICU environment
- Technology
- Lack of control
- Don't feel like a parent
- Asking permission to touch baby
- Family, financial, work responsibilities



[picture of nicu baby on oscillator - Search Images](#)

Why is family-centered care so important?

- We are helping to form families
- Promote lifelong bonds



[GettyImages-181215741.jpg \(1200×630\)](#)



Benefits of Family-Centered Care

- Increased parental confidence
- Parental empowerment and advocacy
- Decreased length of stay
- Decreased readmissions



['Miracle' Baby Home After 183 Days in the NICU | Vitals](#)

- ♦ Emotional and physical well-being of infant
 - ♦ Improved infant weight gain
 - ♦ Shorter duration of parenteral and enteral nutrition
 - ♦ Decreased BPD, ROP and NEC
- ♦ Improved outcomes



DADS IN THE NICU

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DVhtK1Ujt2P/>



<https://youtu.be/vQY5Ba9bqSQ>



Notable Quotes from Dads from “Spilling the Tea”

- Can I really provide him anything?”
- “ . . . we have even less control.”
- “ . . . their baby, not ours.”
- “ . . . very under a microscope.”
- “ . . . eventually I submitted.”







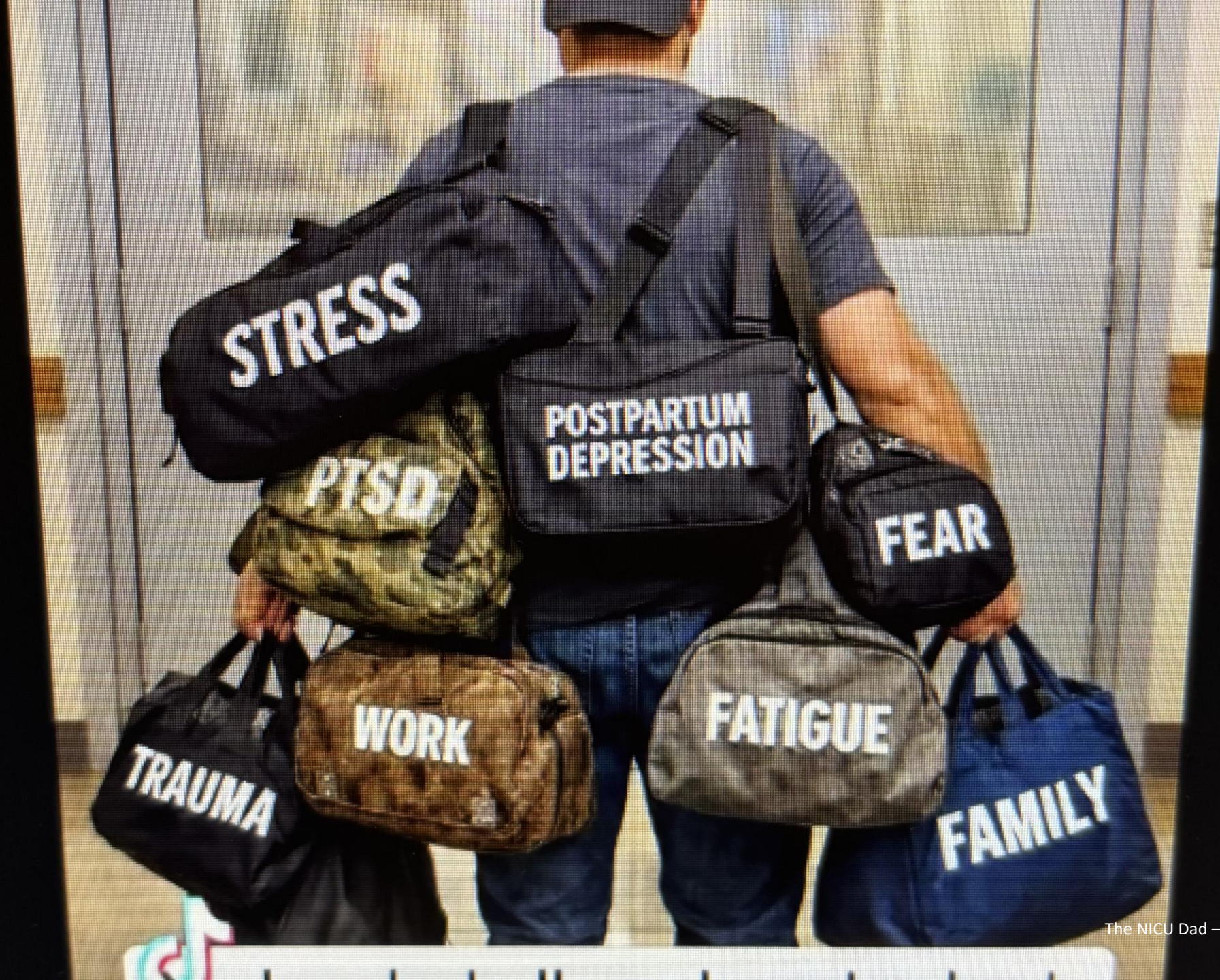
[NICUties Connections: Touching Moments for Twin Parents at the NICU - TwinGo](#)

Importance of Father Involvement

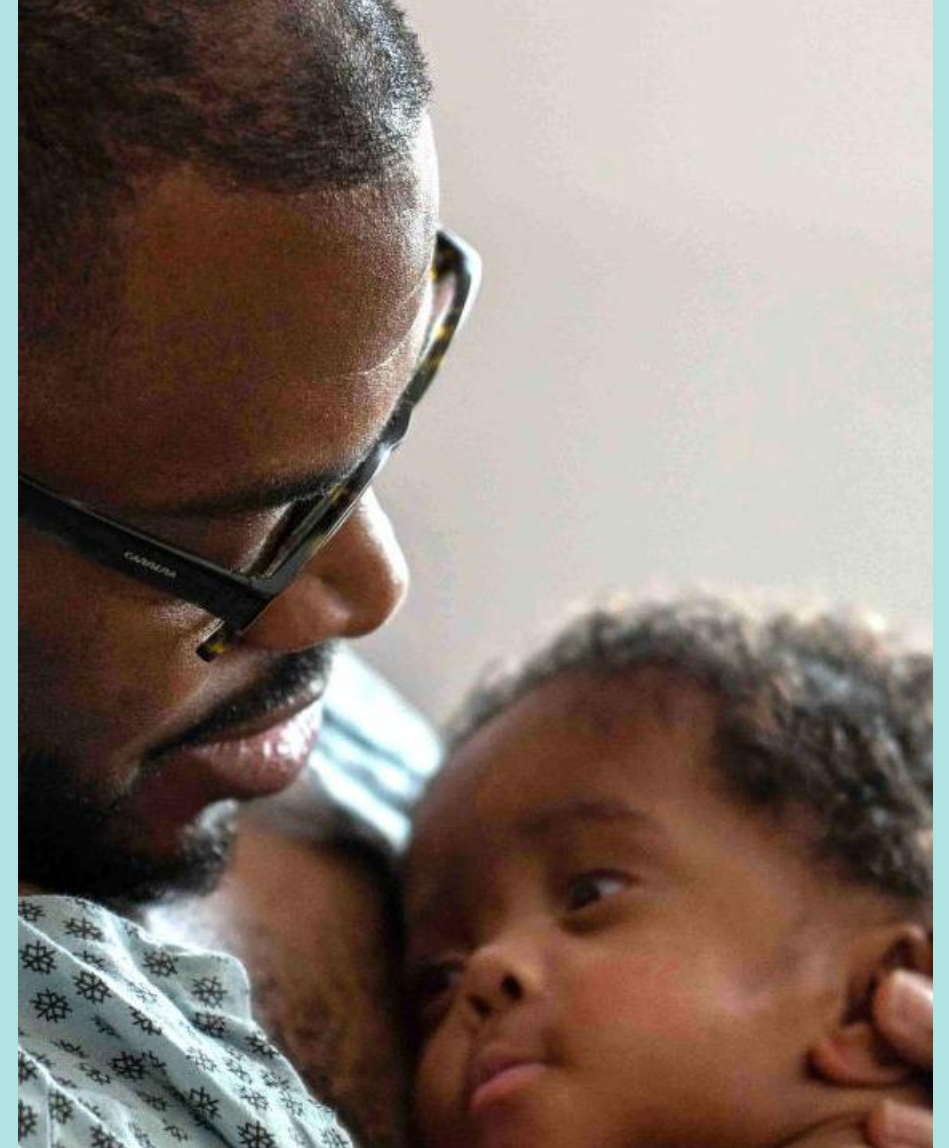
- Hormonal changes in father:
 - Increased empathy, caring, affection and sensitivity
 - Correlated with fathers being more attuned to babies' needs



[Father Dress Up Clothes To His Premature Baby Girl At Hospital High-Res Stock Photo - Getty Images](#)



- ♦ Kim et al. (2016):
 - ♦ Infant neurodevelopment directly affected by paternal involvement (measured at 3 and 4 months of age)
 - ♦ Fathers' support of mother impacted infant neurodevelopment by decreasing stress of mother



Other studies indicate fathers' support of mother:

- Enhances infant welfare
- Lower risk of colic, fussiness in infants of first-time mothers
- Can help with breastfeeding success
- Decrease post-partum depression



[pictures of dad helping mom with nicu baby - Google Search](#)

FCC for Non-Traditional Families

- Same-sex couples in the U.S. more than doubled from 2008-2021
- Reached over 1 million in 2021



- **3.1% of same-sex couples adopt children compared to 1.1% of opposite-sex parents**
- **Male same-sex couples - 6.6% had children under age 18**
- **Female same-sex couples – 22.5% had children under age 18**



Purpose

Describe the beliefs and perceptions of NICU nurses throughout the United States regarding partnering with fathers or other non-birth parents in family-centered care



Review of Literature

Family-centered care is promoted by:

- Institute for Patient- and Family-Centered Care
- National Academy of Medicine
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
- National Association of Neonatal Nurses



Institute for Patient and Family-Centered Care

- Working “with” patients and families
- Not just doing “to” or “for” them



<https://www.bliss.org.uk/parents/in-hospital/about-neonatal-care/being-a-parent-on-the-unit>



Institute for Patient and Family-Centered Care

Four concepts:

- Dignity and Respect
- Information Sharing
- Participation
- Collaboration



American Academy of Pediatrics - family members should be considered as equal members of the care team

National Academy of Medicine - patient-centered, respectful of patients' values, needs and preferences; provide information, communication and education, involve family and friends

National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners – family partnership and guidance is essential

National Association of Neonatal Nurses - family involvement has a lifelong effect on their infants



Review of Literature

Perceptions of Family-Centered Care v. Current Practice

- Bruce & Ritchie (1997) created Family-Centered Care Questionnaire (FCCQ) and FCCQ-Revised (FCCQ-R)
- Measures nurses' perceptions of FCC concepts v. actual practice



Review of Literature

- Several studies utilized FCCQ-R
- All indicated nurses have some knowledge of FCC but does not translate to practice
- Scores for Necessary Practice were all higher than Current Practice
- Barriers: time limitations, knowledge deficit, FCC training, NICU environment, and attitudes regarding partnering with families



Review of Literature - Barriers

Identified by Fathers	Arrow Indicates Identified by Both	Identified by Nurses
Role Beliefs of Fathers		Cultural/Religious influences
Limited Fathers' Presence		Limited Fathers' Presence
NICU Environment		Inadequate Staff Training/Education
Infant Factors (medical status, technologic obstacles)		
Gender Role Conflict/Social Expectations		Gender Role Conflict/Social Expectations
Focus on Mothers as Primary Caregivers		Focus on Mothers as Primary Caregivers



Review of Literature

Fathers value and need the support of NICU nurses

Dearth of research regarding
lesbian/homosexual/adoptive non-birth parents
Scant research concerning nurses' attitudes and
beliefs about lesbian or gay non-birth parents



Theoretical Framework: Salutogenesis

Antonovski's Sense of Coherence



Model of Health

Introduced by Antonovsky (1979)

View of health: “ease/dis-ease” continuum v. “healthy” or “sick”

- Main concept is Sense of Coherence
 - Comprehensibility
 - Manageability
 - Meaningfulness

Theoretical Framework

Chan and Shorey (2021) applied Antonovsky's concepts of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness in their systematic review of healthcare workers' sense of coherence of NICU parental involvement as follows:

- **Comprehensibility:** “cognitive understanding of the work situation being structured and predictable” (Chan & Shorey, 2021, p.876)
- **Manageability:** “staff's perceptions of having adequate internal and external resources to cope with work stressors and demands” (Chan & Shorey, 2021, p. 876)
- **Meaningfulness:** “whether the workplace challenge is worth the staff's time and investment” (Chan & Shorey, 2021, p. 876).



Research Questions

1. **What are NICU nurses' perceptions of partnering with fathers and other non-birth parents in family-centered care in the NICU?**
2. **How do NICU nurses perceive the importance of including fathers or other non-birth parents in family-centered care in the NICU?**
3. **How do NICU nurses involve fathers and other non-birth parents in family-centered care in the NICU?**
4. **Do NICU nurses find meaning in involving fathers or other non-birth parents in family-centered care?**
5. **What are the barriers and facilitators to including fathers and other non-birth parents in family-centered care in the NICU?**



Methodology- Study Design

Qualitative Method

Interpretive Description

- Non-categorical, without strict methodological guidance
- Discover themes & relationships among data, while acknowledging individual discrepancies

(Thorne, 2016)



Methodology- Sample & Setting

NICU nurses currently practicing at the bedside

- 1 year of bedside NICU experience

Recruitment: After IRB approval, invitation to participate was posted on:

- NANN blog
- NEANN newsletter (The Pulse)
- NEANN Facebook page



Sample

10 respondents

1 did not meet criteria

1 did not attend

interview

Final sample of 8 NICU
nurses



[854 Nicu Nurse Stock Photos, High-Res Pictures, and Images - Getty Images](#)



Sample

Years of nursing experience: 4-42

Years as bedside NICU nurse: 2-42

Age: 26-58 years old

5 married; 3 single

Education

- 2 BSN
- 6 Master's Degree

7 female, 1 male

Residence:

- 5 Northeast
- 1 South
- 1 Midwest
- 1 West Coast



Methodology- Data Collection

Individual semi-structured interviews

- 28 minutes – 1 hour, 18 minutes
- Zoom

Audio-recording

Verbatim transcription by Rev.com

Reflexivity journal – reflect on personal beliefs and values, personal preferences and biases



Interpretation of Results: Comprehensibility

Nurses Acknowledge that Family-Centered Care is Important

Nurses' Hesitation to Include Parents in Family-Centered Care

- Parents seen as hindrance; infant safety
- Some participants expressed that they enjoy partnering with families

Birth Mother is Prioritized Over Father or Non-Birth Parent

- Experienced pregnancy, childbirth; hormones; breastfeeding



Interpretation of Results: Comprehensibility

- *Fathers' Apprehension About Participating in Care*
 - Fear of harming infant; discomfort with NICU environment
 - Sometimes fathers defer to mothers; need encouragement
- *Same-Sex and/or Adoptive Parents Treated the Same as Traditional Parents*



“There is a male presence in a female space.”

“I have the dad takes pictures, etc. ‘for mom.’”

“Regardless of how you’re entering this relationship, we’re still going to have you definitely part of the team.”



Interpretation of Results: Manageability

Fathers Not as Present at Bedside as Mother

- **Work responsibilities; Caring for other children; Social situation (relationship with mother)**

Fathers' Apprehension to Participate in Care

- **Fragility of infant; uncomfortable in NICU environment**

Same-Sex or Adoptive Parents Treated Same as Traditional Parents

Surrogate Mother Involvement:

- *Defer to parents re: how involved surrogate mother is involved*



“If they don’t ask, they don’t get”
(nurse too busy to make extra effort)

“If they are engaging, then I am
engaging as well.”



“... you try to encourage the dad to do the other things because he doesn't get to do the breastfeeding part.”



Interpretation of Results: Meaningfulness

Family-Centered Care is Important

- Nurses found meaning in helping parents gain confidence in caring for their child
- Satisfaction from preparing parents for discharge
- One participant conveyed, “It’s fun to teach them”
 - Enjoys helping them hold their infant for the first time



“I personally like to get the dads to do just as much as the moms.”

“It’s fun to teach them.”



Discussion/Results Related to Literature

Nurses' beliefs/attitudes about family-centered care - Results are consistent with literature

- **Nurses believe FCC is important; however, not translated into practice consistently**

Lack of Knowledge

- **Study of nurses in Sri Lanka (Done et al., 2020) indicated nurses' lack of knowledge**
- **In contrast, current study indicates nurses in the U.S. believe they are knowledgeable about FCC**

NICU Nurses' Attitudes Towards Partnering with Families

- **Literature indicates mixed attitudes of HCPs toward partnering with families**
- **Consistent with current study**



Barriers to Family-Centered Care

Literature

1. Staffing challenges
2. Time constraints
3. Inadequate staff education
4. Staff control of parental involvement
5. Staff stress and burnout
6. Lack of organizational support
7. Physical environment of NICU
8. Cultural influences

Study Results

1. Staffing challenges
2. Time constraints
3. 2 participants wanted education
4. **No mention of staff control**
5. 1 participant discussed being “overworked”
6. Same participant mentioned lack of organizational support
7. Physical environment of NICU
8. Cultural influences



Barriers to Including Fathers in FCC

Literature

- Fathers' role beliefs
- Decreased paternal presence
- Focus on mothers
- Infant factors
- Social role expectations
- Maternal gatekeeping

Study Results

- Fathers' role beliefs
- Decreased paternal presence
- Focus on mothers
- Infant factors
- Social role expectations
- No mention of maternal gatekeeping



Limitations

Purposive sampling

- Members of professional association may be:
 - more willing to participate
 - more likely to practice family-centered care
 - more motivated to contribute to improve neonatal nursing practice



Limitations

Potential bias of researcher

- 20 years as NICU nurse

Potential social desirability bias

- Participants may have responded in manner they think would be professionally desirable
- It was reinforced that there are no right or wrong answers
- Assured anonymity



Strengths

Experience of researcher

- 20 years as NICU nurse
- Able to relate to experiences of participants

Participation of a male nurse

- Male nurses account for 11.2% of U.S nurses
- Participation represents 12.5% of respondents



Conclusion

- NICU nurses believe in the importance of FCC in the NICU
- However, it is not practiced consistently
- NICU nurses believe it is important to partner with fathers/NBPs in the provision of FCC in the NICU



Conclusion

- Several barriers to partnering with fathers/NBPs were identified
- Further education and training is required
- Understanding NICU nurses' perceptions of partnering with fathers/NBPs can be the impetus for overcoming barriers and designing interventions to improve FCC in the NICU



What Can We Do?

- PARTNER with fathers and non-birth parents
- Embrace parents as members of the care team
- Respect each family's differences
- Encourage presence at bedside
- Encourage participation in care
- Educate all staff about importance of FCC
- Prioritize FCC – it is essential, NOT optional



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Thank you!

