

“But What About Dad?”

A Guide to Supporting Dads During the NICU Journey

Authored by Alyssa R. Morris, Darby E. Saxbe, and Lauren A. Shapiro

Dads with an infant in the newborn intensive care unit (NICU) can feel pulled in multiple directions. In addition to their day-to-day responsibilities, they are often managing their own emotions, providing support to their partner, and updating concerned family members and friends. For this reason, it is important to meet dads where they are at in terms of expectations and support.

Up to one-third of dads experience postpartum depression after the birth of their child, yet only seven percent of new dads are diagnosed with depression, meaning paternal depression during the newborn period is not always discovered and treated. To compound matters, the transition home from the NICU is a particularly vulnerable time for dads that can cause heightened anxiety. One study found that dads displayed physical signs of stress, measured by a stress hormone called cortisol, during the transition home from the NICU. However, a disconnect between dads’ own reports of stress and their biological indicators of stress was also found, highlighting how societal expectations for men and dads to be “strong” may discourage reporting symptoms or seeking support.

So, what can providers do to help? The first step is recognizing the importance of dads in their babies’ care. While in the NICU, providers can include dads by guiding them in skin-to-skin contact and involving them in care and feeding. These activities can help dads define their parent role and allow them to form a strong bond with their baby.

Providers have the power to shape the experiences of NICU parents. While it is important to encourage and support dads’ involvement, it is equally important to acknowledge that they may be juggling other responsibilities at home. Remember, parents can feel added stress if they feel pressured beyond their capacity. It is important to encourage involvement but not to the point that it adds stress for the parent. For example, providers might explain the benefit of skin-to-skin contact and invite dads to participate when they are comfortable.

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Supporting Dads in the NICU: Tips for Friends and Family

When a baby is in NICU, their dad often has to juggle multiple responsibilities. Dads may still be managing professional duties along with housework, meal prep, and caring for other children in the home. Alleviating these stressors is one of the most helpful things friends and family can do for NICU families. Most importantly, let them know you are here to help.

1

Offer to pick up older kids from school and watch them for a few hours.

2

Start a meal train with a group of coworkers or friends to ensure the family has a hot meal each evening.

3

Take the dog on an afternoon walk so that dad can enjoy an extended visit with the baby.

4

Make a to-go cup of coffee and bring it to him on his way out the door.

5

Change that front light that has burned out, water the plants, collect the mail, or roll the trashcans to (and from) the curb.

6

Create a contact list and offer to send regular updates to dad's support network.

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Supporting Dads in the NICU: Tips for Partners

It can be hard to balance the wellbeing of your relationship while your baby is in the NICU. While dads often try to appear strong, they're worried, too. Avoid letting the stress of the situation create a wedge between you two. Instead, remember to work through this period together as a team.

1

Check in with your partner. You can say something like, "I know all the focus has been on the baby, how are you doing?"

2

Acknowledge that your experiences may be different, and that's okay. You are on the same team.

3

Support dad in having skin-to-skin contact with the baby, and involve them in care and feeding. This may help them to embrace their parental role and form a strong bond with the baby.

4

Recognize that every parent has a different comfort level with caring for a medically fragile infant. Try not to judge, and offer gentle encouragement to be involved.

5

Connect with one another by watching a movie at home, having a cafeteria date night, or taking a brief walk around the hospital while your baby sleeps.

6

Speak up if you are concerned about your partner's mental health. Let them know that you are worried and offer to ask the NICU team for resources.

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Dads in the NICU: Taking Care of Yourself and Seeking Support

While you are busy taking care of everyone else, don't forget to take care of yourself.

1

Do things that make you feel like a dad. Hold your baby skin-to-skin, change diapers, participate in feeding, and read to your baby.

2

Make self-care a priority. It looks different for everyone, so make time for the things that help you feel human and allow you to connect with yourself, even if it's only for a few minutes each day.

3

Let work know what you are going through. Coworkers can be a great support, and NICU dads are often surprised by the supportive gestures of coworkers.

4

Join a support group. Oftentimes, NICUs have parent groups, which allow dads to connect with others going through similar experiences.

5

Let friends and neighbors help take care of life's little tasks. Ask a neighbor to collect your mail, or a trusted friend to walk your dog.

6

Seek out couples or individual therapy. Many NICU dads experience changes in their mood. Attending to your wellbeing will help you manage stress during the NICU stay.

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