

RELATIVES AND FRIENDS

After your baby's arrival, some family members and friends will rally to support you. They will know how to tune in to your needs and provide immense comfort. You will value having these people in your life.

Unfortunately, others may be flooded with fear or feel too uncomfortable to face you. Or they may repeatedly say the wrong things. While most people mean well, not everyone will know how to support you. To guide family and friends, try the following:

- ✚ Tell those close to you what you need. Assistance in grocery shopping, cleaning your home or taking care of your other children can be enormously helpful to you and easy for those who want to help. People who want to be a support often don't know how unless you tell them.
- ✚ Remember that family and friends take their cues from you. If you hide your feelings of distress, they may assume you are doing just fine, until you let them know differently.
- ✚ Assume that insensitive remarks are not meant to hurt you. Gently let people know when a comment stings. Also, let them know how much you appreciate it when they do or say something helpful.
- ✚ Be open and honest about your emotions and your baby's condition. Make it clear you don't expect them to fix the situation, but that you just want a sympathetic ear.
- ✚ Don't worry about protecting others' feelings. They will work through their own feelings, just as you are trying to work through yours.
- ✚ Consider leaving an outgoing message on your answering machine with the information you choose to share. That way you can decide with whom you'd like to talk and still supply information to others.
- ✚ Gently, but firmly, tell those who continue to make you feel worse or make unfair demands on you that this is a difficult time and that you will contact them when you are feeling better.

If you are not getting enough support from those close to you, find other sources of support among extended family and friends, other NICU parents or professional counsellors. Rely on people you can count on.

GRANDPARENTS AND THE NICU: YOUR SPECIAL ROLE

Your beautiful grandchild has arrived. But he or she was born prematurely or is sick, and needs special care. Your joy over your grandchild's birth may be mixed with worry about her health. You also may be concerned about how your son or daughter is coping with the baby's stay in the NICU.

The birth of a premature or sick baby is stressful and difficult for all family members, including grandparents. But keep in mind that, in recent years, there have been great advances in caring for babies who were born too small and too soon or sick. The outlook for your grandchild is likely to be far better than it would have been just a generation ago.

As a parent and a grandparent, you have a very important role during this time. Whether you live nearby or far away, there are things you can do to help support the new parents while their baby is in the NICU. This information may help make this difficult time a bit easier for you and your family.

Common Emotions

You may feel some conflicting emotions after your grandchild is born. All of the feelings listed below are normal and many grandparents experience at least some of them. As your grandchild gets stronger, some of the negative feelings may lessen.

- ✚ Anxiety and fear over your grandchild's medical condition
- ✚ Anger over the difficulties your grandchild and your son or daughter are facing
- ✚ Worry about how your son or daughter is holding up
- ✚ Helplessness over your inability to help your grandchild or ease your child's distress
- ✚ Pride and joy over the latest addition to your family
- ✚ Hope that your grandchild will have the bright future that you and her parents want for her

Keep In Mind

The birth of a sick baby can put stress on the relationships between family members. Your son or daughter is now a parent of a baby in a NICU and, along with his or her partner, is experiencing many intense emotions (including some of those listed above) as their baby struggles to get better. It's important to listen carefully to the parents' feelings and acknowledge them even if you aren't feeling the same way as they are. And be patient with the parents, because they're under stress and may sometimes be irritable and short-tempered.

Many NICU parents, especially mothers, tend to blame themselves for their baby's condition. Most of the time, there is nothing that could have been done to prevent the baby's condition. You can help reassure the parents that this was not their fault.

It's important to respect the parents' decisions. They will have to make many decisions about their baby's care. Some of these decisions are very difficult, and your son or daughter may ask your advice. While your advice is important to the parents, they may not always accept it. Even if you don't agree with their decision, accept that the parents are trying to do what they think is best for their baby under difficult circumstances.

Tell the new mom and dad that you admire how they love and care for their baby. Remember that your kind words and support do make a difference in helping them cope during this trying time.

What You Can Do

There are many things you can do to help your family. Your support and encouragement, as well as your assistance with day-to-day chores can help make this time easier for the new parents.

Celebrate your grandchild's birth.

Congratulate the parents and provide cards and gifts, as is customary in your family, while remaining sensitive to the circumstances. The parents may appreciate items that can be used during the baby's NICU stay, such as photo frames and albums, premie clothing, and disposable cameras. While the NICU experience can be stressful, it also can be filled with tender and loving moments.

Offer to assist with other children. [Siblings of the new baby may be worried about their new brother or sister](#) and upset over separation from their parents. Your love and support can make this time easier for them. Parents also will be better able to cope if they know their older children are well cared for and happy.

Ask what you can do to help. The parents may appreciate help with day-to-day chores around the house. This frees them to spend more time with the baby and with any older children. You can offer to do grocery shopping, prepare meals, clean the house, do laundry, take out the trash, sort mail or care for pets. Because parents often feel overwhelmed with all they have to do, taking over some chores can go a long way in easing their stress.

Visit the baby in the NICU.

Offer to go with the parents to spend time with the baby. The parents may find your support helpful. But make sure to ask how often they would like you to be there, because some parents prefer to spend time alone with their baby.

Touch and hold the baby as soon as possible. Wait for the doctors and parents to give you the go-ahead. Grandparents and their grandchild share a very special bond, and you can start building it now.

Ask the parents if they need a break.

Ask if they would like you to stay with the baby in the NICU while they spend some time with their other children or just relax. Some parents feel more comfortable leaving the NICU if a trusted family member stays with the baby. (Check hospital policy first. Some require the presence of one parent or permission from a parent before they let anyone else visit the baby.)

Call or write regularly.

If you don't live nearby, it's important to let your adult child know that you care.

Ask if you can help keep friends and family informed. You could help relay information about the baby's condition and progress. This is something you can do even if you live far away. You should find out exactly whom the parents want to contact and share only information that the parents have asked you to.

Grandparents play a very special role in a child's life. You are already doing so by providing love and support to your new grandchild and his parents. Remember, all the little things you do can make a big difference for your family.