

# Parent Support in and After NICU

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*January 1, 2019*

One of the most important areas for a parent that has a child in the NICU is appropriate parent support. Parents need to be seen as crucial members of the NICU team and are viewed in the context of their families and communities, so support services need to be accessible to them.

NICU parents experience much stress while their baby is in the NICU, which can lead to depression, sadness, fear, anxiety and loneliness. Those same feelings usually continue when parents bring their babies home from the NICU. Teaching of multiple types helps to empower them with effective tools, and it must begin in the NICU, followed by Early Intervention, post-natal and community services. However, there continues to be a gap in services, especially when it comes to mental health support for families and developmental needs of the infant.

Occupational Therapists can help in a variety of ways. They are trained professionals to help prepare with the transition of parents/infant from NICU to home. OT's can assess the family home and help modify the home environment to meet the needs of both family and infant. OT's can work with other professionals in the community to make sure financial resources are available and that basic needs are in place for the infant. While in the NICU, OT provides teaching through a variety of methods to enhance parent's knowledge and confidence in caring for their infant once discharged to home from the NICU.

OT are quite efficient in teaching basic baby care (swaddled bathing), modifying home to meet the needs of the family/infant, teaching normal development and behavior, and additionally, ways to soothe their baby, assist with feeding and sleeping regulation. Occupational Therapists are educated on what is expected in a full-term infant versus a premature infant. Premature infant's sensory systems mature differently due to NICU environment. They can help parents to adapt and help foster baby's sensory system in the home environment. Providing parents with ways to look for stress/disengagement cues is important so that their infant does not become overwhelmed by sensory input in their home environment.

Most importantly, Occupational Therapist can steer parents toward as many community resources as possible. Some of these resources are Early Intervention, NICU follow-up clinics, home health, outpatient therapies and telehealth websites to help achieve developmental milestones.