Bonding with Your Medically Fragile Baby in the NICU

When you dreamed of delivering your baby, giving birth to your child to have them whisked away by hospital staff to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) was probably not what you planned for. Most parents look forward to spending the first few minutes of their child’s life holding them and bonding with them. The reality is you may not have been able to touch, let alone hold, your baby right away. Now you may worry that you have lost that chance to bond with your baby. We want you to know this is not true. **There are still many ways to bond with your baby during their NICU stay.**

**BONDING IS A PROCESS**
Bonding looks different for every family. How you bond with your baby will depend on several things – your baby’s gestation (how early they were born), their diagnosis, their specific medical issues, and their mom’s health. For example, a baby born at 25 weeks usually cannot be held right away because it is so small and immature, but a baby born at 34 weeks may be held, depending on what its medical issues are. If you are unable to hold your baby within the first 24 hours or even the first several weeks of life, please don’t worry that your chance to bond with your baby is lost.

**YOUR BABY’S DEVELOPING BRAIN**
Before learning ways to bond with your fragile infant, it’s important to understand your infant’s nervous system. **All babies are born with immature and underdeveloped nervous systems.** As they grow, babies depend on their parents and caregivers to teach them about their world. Whether they are growing in the womb or are in the NICU, your baby learns through touch, smell, taste and the sound of your voice. But you don’t want to overwhelm them. Keep bright lights, loud noises and strong smells away whenever possible.

**YOUR OWN FEELINGS**
Babies can tell whether you are tense or relaxed. It helps if you are calm, relaxed and well-rested when you visit. **Taking care of yourself will prepare you to take care of your baby.** Take the time to listen to your body. Rest. Eat. Take a deep breath and check-in with your emotions periodically. Ask yourself: “How am I feeling right now?” (Tense? Tired? Sad? Stressed?) Don’t judge yourself or your feelings, just acknowledge them. When you are in tune with your body it is much easier to be in tune with your baby. **Bonding with your baby starts with you!**
BONDING WITH TOUCH

Before using touch as a way to bond with your baby, talk to your nurse or your neonatologist about appropriate ways to touch YOUR baby. Every infant’s medical situation is different, and the type of touch that is appropriate for some infants, may not be for others.

Touch is a very powerful way of bonding with your baby if your baby is stable and strong enough to tolerate it. The following are ways to bond with your baby through touch:

- **Practice Skin to Skin Contact and Kangaroo Care** Both moms and dads can bond with baby in this way. Besides being a great way to bond, Kangaroo Care helps your baby regulate their breathing, keeps them warm, helps them learn muscle control and teaches them to be calm. It can also help increase milk production for mom if she is breastfeeding. Even if your baby is not breastfeeding, you can still hold them skin-to-skin while they are taking their feedings.

- **Touch Them Gently** If you are unable to hold your baby, touch a finger, hand, toe or any body part you are able to reach. This lets your baby know you are there and brings you closer to one another.

- **Talk to Your Bedside Nurse** Your nurse can show you types of touch that are appropriate for your baby. They can also show you how to create soft boundaries around your baby and help your baby feel more comfortable and contained like when they were in the womb.

- **Pay Attention** When visiting the NICU, pay close attention to what your infant enjoys and dislikes. Adapt your behavior based on your baby’s preferences.

OTHER WAYS TO BOND WITH YOUR BABY

Bonding through touch is not possible for all infants and families. Some infants are too fragile to hold, or even touch. Here are ways to bond with your baby, whether touch is possible or not:

- **Visit Often** Spend as much time bedside as you can. When you need to rest, ask a family member or friend to be with your baby, if possible.

- **Make Eye Contact** If your infant is comfortable with this, stare lovingly into their eyes.

- **Place Hands Near Your Baby** If your baby can tolerate it, hold your hands above your baby’s body or near their head – without touching. Your presence can be felt, and you will feel more connected.

- **Leave Your Scent** Check with NICU staff to learn what cloth items are appropriate to place in your baby’s space. Sleep with that item or wear it all day tucked under your clothing, then place in your baby’s space.

- **Use Your Voice** Sing, speak in soft tones, whisper, hum, talk and read to your baby.

- **Bring Home to the Hospital** Bring pieces of your family’s life to place near your infant’s isolette or crib, such as family photos, a special blanket, artwork from siblings and more.

Bonding with your medically fragile infant can seem challenging at first, when all you see is the medical equipment separating you. But by using these methods, you can overcome the barriers between you and your amazing baby and begin the wonderful journey of getting to know them. Remember that bonding is a process, and once you and your baby leave the NICU, you will find new ways to strengthen your special bond.

For more information check out www.handtohold.org

Get personalized help from a parent who has been where you are now.

If you have questions or need help, call Hand to Hold’s Family Support Navigator for assistance.