

Parenting Your Premature Baby and Child: The Emotional Journey

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Introduction

The premature birth of your baby* is a medical crisis. But more than that, it is a family crisis. When your baby is born too soon, you must face not only the medical aspects of prematurity but also the many emotional aspects of parenting your premature baby. During your baby's hospitalization, after homecoming, and perhaps throughout childhood, there are three overarching, emotionally intense challenges you face:

- Coping with feelings
- Developing your parental identity
- Managing your relationships

Coping with feelings includes

- Learning to identify, express, and cope with a bewildering array of conflicting emotions (including joy, sorrow, love, detachment, pride, guilt, gratitude, anger, confidence, helplessness, hope, fear)
- Doing grief work so that you can adjust and come to terms with your baby's premature birth and its consequences

Developing your parental identity includes

- Feeling connected to your baby
- Playing an indispensable role in the NICU
- Being your baby's advocate
- Acquiring new caregiving skills

- Gaining confidence
- Being protective without being overprotective
- Facing medical or developmental uncertainties or special needs
- Becoming the kind of parent you want to be

Managing your relationships includes

- Communicating and collaborating with your partner; your baby's health care providers; your other children (if any); and your relatives, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances
- Interacting with pregnant women and parents of full-term babies
- Acquiring a support network of other parents of preemies

This book addresses all these challenges, and more.

Indeed, this book rides on the crest of a new wave. In recent years, neonatology has become much more than medical technology. Along with providing state-of-the-art interventions, more and more NICUs are also providing developmentally supportive care to babies—and to their parents. Developmentally supportive care for a premature baby consists of close contact with the parents and being surrounded by the muted, gentle, nurturing conditions that mimic the womb. Developmentally supportive care for parents consists of honoring their need to get physically close and feel emotionally connected to their newborn and become confident in taking care of this baby. In other words, developmentally supportive care tries to give babies and parents what they've been promised.

Instead of banishing parents to waiting rooms or allowing them to merely look through a plate-glass window, modern NICU policy welcomes parents as integral members of their baby's NICU caregiving team and considers parental involvement paramount—good for the babies, good for the parents, good for the family. Indeed, when parents are given opportunities to be close to their baby and are encouraged and coached in caregiving, they can become attuned, responsive, and sure with their little one. When parents are informed about their baby's conditions and treatments, they can advocate for their baby's needs. When parents are supported emotionally, they can be more

emotionally available to their baby. These positive, connective emotional experiences between parent and baby contribute to optimal infant development. This book reflects and accompanies the emerging respect for the developmental needs of the entire family and the spreading philosophy of family-centered care.

There are many good books that explain your premature baby's medical conditions, developmental diagnoses, treatments, and procedures, and that guide you in caregiving tasks. This book is different. It focuses on your experiences, feelings, and relationships around the delivery, hospitalization, homecoming, and long-term parenting of your premature baby and child. It provides suggestions and support for coping, adjusting, and finding your way. It focuses on how you can deal with the challenges you meet so you can revel in the pleasures of nurturing and cherishing your little one. With quotes from many parents, this book also strives to provide you with the comfort of knowing that your reactions make sense and that *you're not alone*.

While every family's journey is unique, you share many of the same hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, struggles, and triumphs with other parents of premature babies. It is our hope that you will find comfort, reassurance, support, and strength in these pages.

www.ParentingYourPrematureBaby.com