

The Importance of a father's presence in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

By Humayrah Ahmed



Introduction

Every year, over 100 000 babies are cared for in the neonatal unit in the UK (Neonatal Data Analysis Unit, 2017).

When babies are born, it becomes an overwhelming joyous yet frightening time of every new parent's life. But when baby comes early and become part of the strange world of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), a parent can often feel out of place (Iono et al., 2019).



Background

Often, when it comes to neonates, care and attention is often directed at the mothers (Diffin et al., 2013). This fathers feeling left out and feeling as though they are overstepping, where they are referred to as 'the other parent' (Govindaswamy et al., 2020).

It is important for fathers to be present as it helps with bonding and companionship where research has shown that involving fathers in new born care in NICU is essential; not only because it promotes the father/child attachment relationship and has positive effects on the psychological and somatic development of the new born, but also for the health of the mother and whole family and that when fathers are more involved (Hearn et al., 2020).

What has been done :

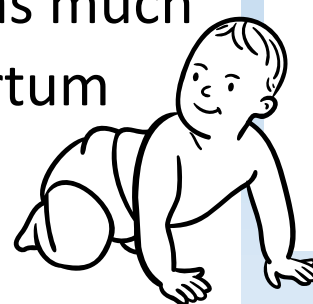
It is important to note that a father's presence is not always dismissed and some work has been published to include dad's too:

- Kangaroo care has been recognised to improve bonding and overall health for neonates worldwide (Stadd et al., 2020). It has been recognised that skin to skin for fathers equally benefits the baby too. (Kadivar & Mozafarinia, 2013)
- DadPad (2023) is a website recently launched to unite fathers and specialises in providing material to help with neonatal fathers.
- Online blogs such as 'Premdad' (2021) and 'The NICU dad' (Zavala, 2022) recognise the emotional aspect and have designed books and articles to help fathers through each stage of being at NICU.



Why can't dads be present ?

- ☹ Paternity leave in the UK is limited and if fathers want to take longer time off work, it would have to be through their own allowance. However the average length of stay for babies born between 28- 31 weeks is 44 days (Neonatal Data Analysis Unit, 2017).
- ☹ There is a lack of inclusivity for fathers as much mostly has the attention due to postpartum needs and breastmilk supply (Ireland et al., 2016).



- ☹ Stereotypes paint the father to be strong and emotionless and too busy bringing home money for the family as oppose to being there for the baby.

Mean importance of neonatal family needs inventory subscales for fathers at admission and discharge (Govindaswamy et al., 2020).

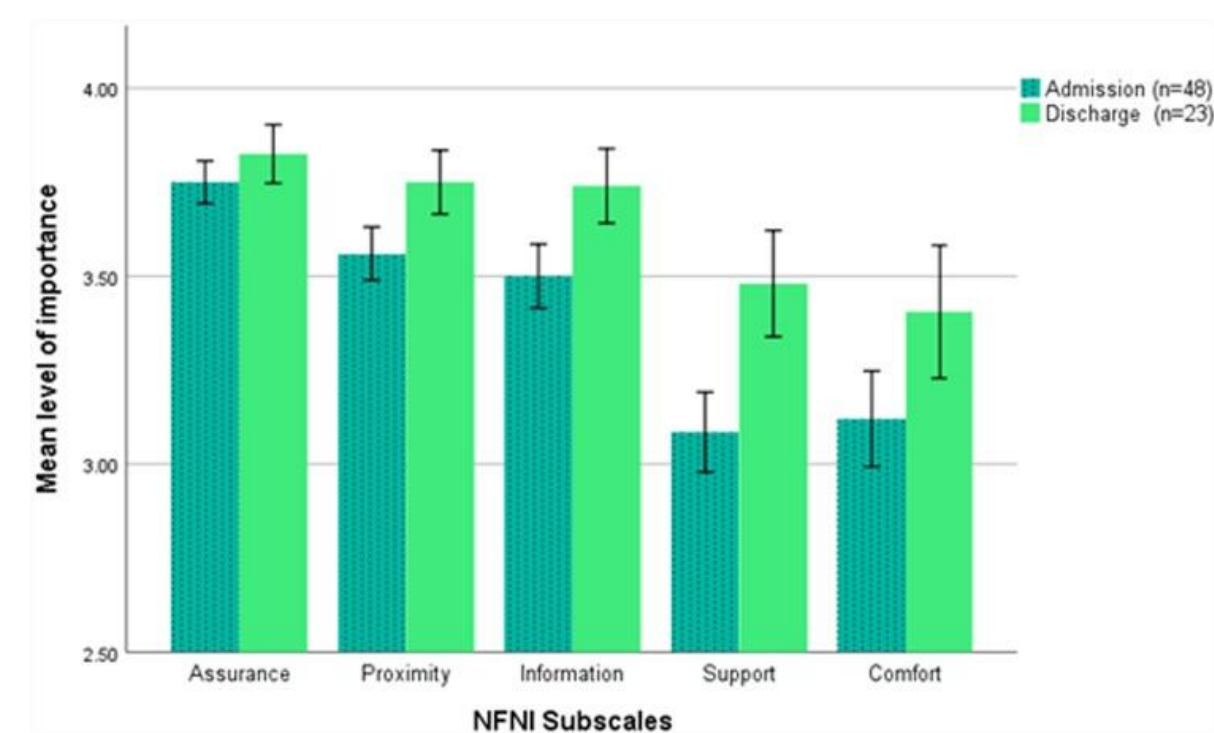


Table 1. This table shows the mean of importance for support, comfort, information, proximity and assurance at admission and discharge and whether these needs were met.

Dad's cry too! – recognising PTSD among fathers

Mental health for fathers are often dismissed. By hiding their feelings, it can often affect them through post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the long run (Ocampo et al., 2021).

Steps for improvement :

- Healthcare professionals should be mindful to address both parents.
- Nurses should **educate** dads on what they can do to make their experience at NICU better, such as giving **advice** on work leave and balancing on caring for the home, baby and mum.

Fathers see nurses as a source of support. When the nurses show case that support, fathers feel less intimidated.

- 'FICare' (Family integrated care) may improve experiences for fathers of preterm infants in the NICU with continuation post discharge. Future research should include designing and evaluating father specific NICU programs .
- Appreciating fathers at the bedside can encourage all dads to feel more welcomed.

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