Because of nursing research, there is a program to help the parents of a premature infant learn about prematurity. As a result, they feel more confident in their knowledge and beliefs about their premature infants. The program empowers parents to be more involved in their infant’s care, leading to better infant outcomes.

The problem of premature births

Each year in the U.S., over half a million infants are born prematurely (before 37 weeks gestation). These infants are often very small, and most have not been able to put on the expected layers of “baby fat,” so they tend to look very thin. Their skin is often shiny and translucent, and they have not had time to develop, and their behaviors and reactions may be very limited.

Premature infants often face immediate life-and-death concerns and require highly specialized care in a Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Their health may remain fragile throughout infancy. In the long term, they are at risk for a wide range of physical and developmental problems.

Parental stress and anxiety

Most expectant parents look forward to the arrival of a healthy, well-developed baby. A premature birth drastically alters this expectation, worries about their baby’s survival. They are unfamiliar with the thin and frail appearance of a premature infant. Rather than taking the baby home to a quiet nursery, they must deal with the noisy, busy, and technical environment of the NICU. As time passes, new concerns often arise about the effects of prematurity on the health and growth of their child.

Many parents of premature infants experience high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. Some may respond by avoiding the NICU and the parents were better prepared and more confident to provide care at home.

Discussions with the NICU staff indicated two possible reasons for these shortened hospital stays: the infants had improved growth and development, and the parents were better prepared and more confident to provide care at home.

The impact of COPE

After publishing these results, Dr. Melnyk received calls about COPE from neonatal units across the country. In follow-up, the program could help premature infants and their parents across the country, and result in large savings in health care costs.

According to Dr. Melnyk, “The COPE program helps parents feel more confident with their special babies and interact more appropriately. This translates to less stress, less depression, better parenting, and healthier children.”

For more information about COPE, please contact:
Bernadette Mazurek Melnyk, PhD, RN, CPNP/PMHNP, FNP, FAAN
Associate Vice President for Health Promotion
University Chief Wellness Officer
Dean, College of Nursing
The Ohio State University
American Academy of Nursing, Edge Runners profile:

COPE for Hope
Information available at: www.copeforhope.com

Glossary:
COPE: Creating Opportunities for Parent Empowerment, a nurse-led educational and parenting skill building program for parents of a preterm infant.
Premature (or preterm) birth: The birth of an infant before 37 weeks of gestation. The normal length of pregnancy is around 40 weeks, and premature infants are at high risk for a wide range of physical, developmental, and behavioral problems.
Newborn Intensive Care Unit, or NICU: A highly specialized and technical hospital unit for the care of premature infants.

Page last updated Jun 05, 2012

Back to Top