

PREEMIE<sup>®</sup>  
PARENTS

# TINY HANDS GIANT LOVE

*A Guide for*  
Fathers in the NICU



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# A Note to Preemie Dads

You arrive with your tie askew, rushing from the office. You wash your hands with surgical precision - maybe you asked them to show how you a few times, not because you couldn't get it right, but because you were terrified of making a mistake. We see you. We understand the weight of this moment.

Your journey to fatherhood probably didn't start the way you imagined. There were no celebratory cigars, no "it's a girl" balloons. Instead, you found yourself learning medical terms you never wanted to know and studying monitors like they hold the secrets to the universe.

At work, colleagues mean well but rarely understand why your lunch breaks are spent on video calls with doctors, or why your mind wanders during meetings to thoughts of your tiny baby in the NICU. Even your family might struggle to understand this new reality, offering well-meaning but misplaced advice about traditional baby care when all you need is someone to acknowledge that your path to fatherhood, though different, is just as valid and vital.



## Finding Your Way

Your journey to fatherhood in the NICU exists alongside the rest of your life – a life that doesn't stop just because your world has been turned upside down. While part of your heart lives in this medical world of beeping monitors and scrubbed hands, you're also trying to maintain some sense of normalcy.

Maybe you find yourself checking stats on your phone during your NICU visits, half-watching the game while counting your baby's breaths. Perhaps you're sitting through meetings at work, nodding along while your mind drifts to the morning's medical update. That pickup basketball game you never miss? Now you're wondering if it's okay to still go, if it makes you a bad dad to want that hour of normal.

The truth is, there's no guidebook for balancing it all. Some days you'll feel guilty doing your favorite hobby instead of sitting by the incubator. Other days, you need that moment of ordinary life to keep your strength up for the extraordinary challenge you're facing. Both are okay.

This balance – between crisis and routine, between preemie dad and everything else you are – is part of your journey. You'll learn to take conference calls in hospital parking lots, to squeeze in workouts during lunch so you can visit in the evening, to maintain friendships even when friends don't quite understand. You're not just a preemie dad; you're a whole person trying to navigate an unexpected path.

Taking time to maintain parts of your normal life isn't selfish – it's necessary. Whether it's watching the last quarter of the game, meeting friends for a quick coffee, or keeping up with your hobbies, these moments of normalcy can be the breathers that help you stay strong for the marathon ahead.

# Building Your Tribe

## Connecting with Other Dads

There's a unique kind of isolation that comes with being a NICU dad. While everyone asks about the baby and your partner, few understand the complex mix of emotions you're navigating. You might feel like you're the only one trying to balance board meetings with beeping monitors, or client calls with kangaroo care. But you're not alone on this journey. Other dads have walked this path, and connecting with them can make all the difference.

### Finding Your People

- **NICU Dad Support Groups:** These exist specifically for fathers like you. Here, you can talk about:
  - The pressure of balancing work and NICU life
  - Fears you might not share with your partner
  - Practical tips for navigating the NICU
  - Ways to support your family while staying strong
  - The unique challenges of being a NICU dad
- **Evening Parent Meetings:** Many hospitals schedule these intentionally for working parents
  - Meet other parents at similar stages
  - Learn from those further along in their journey
  - Share experiences and coping strategies
  - Build relationships with hospital staff
  - Get updates and information in a group setting





## Online Connections

Social media groups and online forums can be lifelines, especially during late-night worries or early morning anxieties:

- Join Facebook groups specifically for NICU fathers
- Follow NICU dad bloggers and Instagram accounts
- Participate in online support forums
- Connect through hospital-sponsored virtual groups
- Join WhatsApp or Telegram groups for immediate support

## Unit-Level Connections

Some of the strongest bonds form right there in the NICU:

- Strike up conversations with other dads during shift changes
- Share experiences during kangaroo care sessions
- Exchange numbers with dads whose babies have similar journeys
- Create informal support networks within your unit
- Learn from dads who are further along in their NICU stay

## Creating Your Space in the NICU

The NICU can feel like foreign territory, with its own language, rules, and rhythms. Between the medical equipment, busy staff, and constant activity, it's easy to feel like an outsider in your own child's story. But there are ways to claim your space in this environment, to create moments and memories that are uniquely yours, even within the clinical setting.



## Establishing Rituals

Morning routines that center you and help you connect to your baby:

- A specific greeting for your baby
- A special song you always sing
- Reading the same book or poem
- Sharing updates about siblings or family

## Documenting the Journey

Even though mom might be keeping records, keep a journal of your own NICU journey:

- Record daily progress, no matter how small
- Write letters to your baby
- Note questions for doctors and nurses
- Track milestones and celebrations
- Document your own emotional journey

## Visual Memory-Keeping

Create a photo timeline:

- Take daily pictures from the same angle
- Capture milestone moments
- Document medical equipment being removed
- Show size comparison with a special toy
- Include siblings and family in photos when you can



## Finding Your Sanctuary

Identify spaces for getting a break or finding moments of peace and reflection

- A quiet corner in the hospital garden
- A peaceful spot in the chapel
- A favorite chair in the family room
- A bench outside with a good view





## Self-Care Isn't Selfish

You've probably heard the flight safety instruction to "put your own oxygen mask on first." It might feel counterintuitive, even selfish, to think about your own needs right now. But maintaining your strength – physical, emotional, and mental – isn't optional. It's essential for the marathon you're running. Your family needs you to stay strong, and that means taking care of yourself along the way.

### Understanding the Load

**As a NICU dad, you're carrying multiple burdens:**

- Emotional support for your partner
- Financial responsibilities
- Work obligations
- Care for other children
- Your own emotional processing
- Family and social expectations
- Medical decisions and advocacy

## Give Yourself Permission to Be Human

Remember:

- It's okay to feel overwhelmed
- You don't have to be strong all the time
- Your feelings are valid and important
- Asking for help shows wisdom, not weakness
- Taking care of yourself helps your family



## Professional Support

Consider:

- NICU social workers
- Hospital chaplains
- Professional counselors
- Support groups
- Employee assistance programs



## Creating Balance in Chaos

### Physical Well-being

Quick workout routines

- Hospital stair climbing
- Parking lot walking
- Home exercise videos
- Stretching breaks
- Stress-relief exercises

### Mental Health

Mindfulness practices

- 5-minute meditation apps
- Deep breathing exercises
- Guided relaxation
- Stress-management techniques
- Anxiety-reduction strategies

### Maintaining Connections

Stay connected to your support system

- Schedule brief coffee meets
- Regular check-ins with friends
- Family video calls
- Quick text updates
- Social media updates

### Personal Time

Find moments for yourself

- Early morning quiet time
- Lunch break solitude
- Evening wind-down routine
- Weekend recharge periods
- Hobby continuation





## A Note About Family Balance

Life doesn't stop when you enter the NICU world, though sometimes it feels like it should. You're not just a NICU dad – you're still a partner, maybe a father to other children, an employee, a friend, a son. Finding ways to maintain these roles while adding "preemie dad" to your identity is one of the biggest challenges you'll face.

## Supporting Your Partner

Your relationship is facing one of its biggest tests. You're both experiencing the same storm, but sometimes in very different boats. While your partner may be dealing with physical recovery, pumping schedules, and long days in the NICU, you're juggling work, home, and hospital visits while trying to be her rock. Understanding how to support each other through this time is crucial for both your baby and your relationship.

### Being Present

Your presence matters in multiple ways:

- Physical presence when possible
- Emotional availability always
- Active participation in care
- Shared decision-making
- United front in challenges



### Communication Strategies

Listen actively

- Acknowledge feelings without fixing
- Ask open-ended questions
- Reflect what you hear
- Share your own feelings
- Create safe spaces for vulnerability



### Practical Support

Share the load

- Coordinate hospital visits
- Manage family communications
- Handle practical logistics
- Organize support systems
- Maintain home routines

### Emotional Connection

Build your bond

- Share daily highlights
- Create private signals or codes
- Maintain physical affection
- Remember you're a team
- Celebrate small wins together

## Growing Together Through Crisis

Crisis has a way of either breaking bonds or forging them stronger. The NICU journey, with all its challenges and uncertainties, is teaching you a new kind of fatherhood – one that's more resilient, more nuanced, and often more profound than what you might have imagined. This isn't the path you would have chosen, but it's shaping you into exactly the father your child needs.



### Redefining Fatherhood

This journey is teaching you a new way to be a dad:

- Finding strength in gentleness
- Leading through vulnerability
- Supporting without controlling
- Loving through uncertainty
- Growing through challenge

### Building New Skills

You're developing:

- Medical advocacy
- Emotional intelligence
- Crisis management
- Patient resilience
- Adaptive parenting

## Looking Forward

Your NICU experience will shape you:

- Greater appreciation for life
- Deeper emotional capacity
- Stronger family bonds
- Enhanced parenting skills
- Increased resilience



# Balancing Home and the NICU Supporting Your Other Children

Your kids at home might be experiencing:

- Confusion about the situation
- Jealousy over attention given to the baby
- Worry about their sibling
- Fear about changes in family routine
- Anger or frustration they can't express



One of the hardest parts of the NICU journey is dividing your heart between the baby fighting in the hospital and the children waiting at home. Your older kids might not fully understand why mom and dad are suddenly less present, why routines have changed, or why everyone seems worried. If you're willing to be creative and put in a bit more effort, there are many ways to stay connected to your kids. Pick and choose from these ideas based on your child(ren)'s age.

## Daily Digital Touchpoints

- Create short, personalized good morning videos before work
- Send silly selfies during your lunch break
- Do virtual bedtime stories via video call from the NICU – you can read to kids at home and your preemie at the same time.
- Text older kids their own special updates
- Share photos of what you're doing (even if it's just work stuff)

## Special Delivery Dad

- Pack surprise messages in their lunch boxes, jacket pockets or backpacks
- Mail them actual letters or postcards (kids love getting mail)
- Leave "treasure maps" or clues that lead to small gifts or activities

## Making Moments Count

- Create a bedtime ritual that only you do
- Designate specific "kid time" in your calendar when you're 100% focused on them
- Plan one-on-one "dates" with each child

## Involve Them in the NICU Journey

- Let them help pick out clothes/toys for the baby
- Create a sibling scrapbook about their new brother/sister
- Make "big sibling" badges or shirts together
- Record them singing songs for the baby
- Help them draw pictures to decorate the NICU space

## Weekend Warriors

- Create a weekend morning tradition (pancake faces, pillow forts)
- Plan micro-adventures (30-minute expeditions)
- Have "daddy's helper" time where they can help with chores
- Do quick craft projects together
- Have dance parties



## Technology with Purpose

- Play online games together when apart
- Create shared playlists to listen to "together" when apart

## Physical Connection Activities

- Special high-fives or fist bumps
- "Superman" hugs when reuniting
- "Haul" them off to bed
- Silly face contests



## Creating Routine Connections

- Always say the same special phrase when leaving
- Create a specific return-home greeting
- Have a daily "highlight sharing" ritual

## Making Up for Missed Moments

- Take photos of things you want to share with them
- Keep notes of things to tell them
- Save small souvenirs from your day
- Create "IOU" tickets for special activities
- Plan "make-up" celebrations for missed events

Quality over quantity is key. Small, consistent connections matter more than grand gestures. Your children need to know they're still a priority in your life, even during this challenging time. Be creative and find ways to weave these connections into your new routine, even if they look different than before.



## A Message for the Hard Days

Every NICU dad has them – those days when everything feels overwhelming, when the progress seems too slow, when the beeping monitors and medical terms blur together, and when you question whether you're doing enough. These days are part of the journey, and it's important to remember what you might forget in those moments.

If you want more ideas or support, join us in our Premie Parents community.



### The Dad You're Becoming

- In the NICU, you're learning to:
- Love fiercely yet gently
  - Find strength in vulnerability
  - Navigate uncertainty with grace
  - Trust your parental instincts
  - Build resilience through challenge