



# An Effective Communication Initiative: Using parents' experiences to improve the delivery of difficult news in the NICU



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## KEYWORDS

Infant;  
Premature;  
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care unit;  
Communication;  
Parents;  
Family-centered care;  
Bad news

**Abstract** *Objective:* Enhance the quality of communication between parents and neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) staff.

*Methods:* Parents of preterm infants and staff designed and implemented in-service training regarding the parent perspective on the impact of poor communication in the NICU. Gaps in the experience/needs of staff around delivering bad news were examined using a questionnaire and addressed by improving unit procedures.

*Results:* Most NICU staff, regardless of their role, years in healthcare, and experience/confidence with delivering difficult news to families, indicated a need for more support and training. Improvements to unit procedures included holding family meetings soon after an infant's birth, including all members of the infant's healthcare team in family meetings, providing clinical fellows with training on delivering bad news, and documenting discussions in family meetings for everyone's reference.

*Abbreviations:* NICU, neonatal intensive care unit.

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*Conclusion:* Incorporation of parent experiences of communication in the NICU is effective in addressing challenges associated with delivering difficult news.  
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## Introduction

The environment of the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) is extremely overwhelming, especially for parents who are already under stress and grieving due to their infant's unexpected admission, critical illness, or difficult start to life. As such, the use of a family-centered care approach that directly involves parents in their infant's care is a critical component of NICU care (Gooding et al., 2011). One of the cornerstones of family-centered care is effective communication and information exchange, which facilitates mutual understanding and collaborative decision making between parents and medical professionals, and ensures that care is responsive not only to the family's unique needs, circumstance, and values, but to the infant's best interests (Gooding et al., 2011; Bruns and Steeples, 2001; Carter and Maroney, 2003). Effective communication is particularly important in the delivery of difficult news as poor communication can add significantly to parents' feelings of grief (Armentrout and Cates, 2011; Laing and Freer, 2008). Unfortunately, training and strategies for effective communication with families are inconsistently implemented and many physicians feel poorly prepared to deliver bad news in the NICU (Harrison and Walling, 2010).

As a NICU that aspires to provide the best in family-centered care, this article describes how we developed and implemented an 'Effective Communication Initiative' in our unit to enhance the level of care and quality of communication between parents and staff in our facility.

## Principles of effective communication in the NICU

The first step in developing the Effective Communication Initiative was the formation of a working group of parents and healthcare professionals interested in creating collaborative strategies for delivering difficult news to families. All parents involved had the experience of having an infant in the NICU (i.e., veterans) and were part of our Parent Advisory Committee (a parent-led group with staff support that provides parents with the

opportunity to become partners in the planning, development, and evaluation of programs to address ongoing NICU issues). From the initial meeting, it was evident that the quality of communication between healthcare professionals and parents and even among healthcare professionals themselves needed to be improved. Based on the concerns that veteran parents raised, healthcare professionals felt that they were at times unequipped to deliver difficult information to families. Further, the nursing staff felt inadequately equipped to support families at the bedside and expressed that this was largely a result of not being consistently included in family meetings where medical updates are discussed with parents, primarily by the staff physician. These concerns reinforced the necessity of an Effective Communication Initiative working group to improve and foster more effective communication practices in the NICU.

The Effective Communication Initiative working group then reviewed the existing literature to better understand the principles of effective communication in the NICU. Many of the recommendations were developed by understanding parents' perspectives and what they perceive to be helpful or not during end-of-life care (Bruns and Steeples, 2001; Armentrout and Cates, 2011; Wocial, 2000). Overall it has been found that *how information* is communicated greatly influences parent's perspectives of their interactions with providers and their confidence and trust in the care they are receiving (Wocial, 2000; Ptacek and Eberhardt, 1996). In times of distress, parents often recount that being surrounded by calm professionals who displayed empathy and genuine emotions was appreciated because it signified that their baby was valued and had an effect on other lives (Armentrout and Cates, 2011; Wocial, 2000; Henley and Schott, 2008). Parents report that they want information to be delivered in a comprehensible and consistent manner and they want to be included in the decision-making process and end-of-life care (Armentrout and Cates, 2011). Respect and responsiveness to the family's well-being, preferences, and cultural values is also imperative when delivering services under the family-centered model, as it provides an opportunity to develop a trusting and respectful

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