

I WILL NEVER FORGET EARLY ON IN my daughter Becky's NICU stay when my mother-in-law, a former RN, asked, "I wonder when they will let you do kangaroo care?" Confused, I shrugged but filed that nugget away in my NICU parent brain. A week later, I was able to hold my daughter and reminded the nurses again and again that I wanted to make sure I could do "kangaroo care." I silently and nervously looked about me in the NICU. Where was the kangaroo?

When the time came, I quickly realized that I was the actual "kangaroo!" At first, Becky felt like a cold and clammy insect on my chest but then she started to warm up with my body heat and my husband exclaimed, "Deb, you have *got* to see the look on her face."

Later I saw the pictures and was blown away by this amazing feat that had not only put my daughter into a blissful nap but also resulted in her most stable vital signs to date. I felt powerful, even a bit magical. I finally felt like a mother and could do something amazing for my daughter that showed immediate effect. It was like winning the lottery.

Despite the amazing benefits of kangaroo care, I am dismayed to hear that many hospitals across the country still do not have this practice as a standard part of care for premature infants, despite mothers requesting it time and time again. From a parent perspective, it is important to outline the benefits of this natural type of care and its ability to help develop a partnership with the infant's team of doctors, nurses, and specialists.

1. **Kangaroo care helps the baby.** Remember that the baby is outside of the womb before he or she is ready and therefore is unable to easily cope with the overwhelming surroundings of the NICU. Beeping machines, loud talking, bright lights, and more have been shown to create a lasting effect on the infant brain developmentally.¹ Kangaroo care allows the infant to be placed back into a more familiar environment with a known voice, smell, and heartbeat. All of these factors can contribute to the overall health of the baby.
2. **Kangaroo care gives parents a chance to be a parent.** Parents are already feeling huge amounts of stress caused by the chaotic and traumatic effects of the early birth. They have lost all control especially now as NICU staff members take over the care of their baby's physical needs. Allowing kangaroo care will give parents a role to play—one that has huge benefits for all involved. Beyond the baby's needs, it also shows respect for the parents and their role and can go a long way in building a strong partnership that will continue to benefit the baby.
3. **Kangaroo care promotes breastfeeding.** Kangaroo care is a perfect way to gently introduce breastfeeding and is another way for mothers to help their child. The baby in a kangaroo position is already close to the breast and is able to send signals to the mother of what

Kangaroo Care: Worth the Time and Effort

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he or she wants. Nothing is a more powerful message to Mom that breastfeeding is a great idea than a baby on the chest seeking out the nipple.

4. **Kangaroo care can save every-one time.** Despite what many might think, taking the time out

to help a family do kangaroo care is worth it. In the long run, the families will likely feel more in control of things and will have a stronger mental state by being able to do what comes naturally—nurture their baby. This could easily lessen the conflicts between families and staff members thereby freeing up time to focus on the baby and other important matters. Just like other scheduled tasks, perhaps there could be a schedule for kangaroo care time as well.

5. **Kangaroo care promotes a shared joy between parent and professional.** Taking the time to allow a family to participate in kangaroo care with their newborn fosters mutual respect and trust. This is crucial and is a wise investment because when emergencies happen and there isn't time to argue about details, the families will likely show their faith and let the professionals do their work.

For those interested in further research from a medical professional's point of view, one of the best works on kangaroo care is by Susan Ludington-Hoe, author of *Kangaroo Care: The Best You Can Do to Help Your Preterm Infant*. In addition to having every NICU professional read this book, the book should also be passed onto every parent in the NICU.

Thinking back to my experience with my own daughter and kangaroo care, I believe it is important to build kangaroo care into the treatment plan and to have it be a standard of care in the doctor's orders for all premature infants. The end result with kangaroo care is that—with a little planning—everyone wins. Parents feel part of the team, and professionals can use this as a tool to create a partnership of trust and an entry point for educating families. Most of all, the baby is getting all of the best possible medical and developmental care that is sure to help him survive and thrive.

REFERENCE

1. Ludington-Hoe SM, Swinth JY. Developmental aspects of kangaroo care. *J Obstet Gynecol Neonatal Nurs*. 1996;25(8):691-703.

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Disclosure

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