

An intervention program for preterm infants and their parents: The transition from hospitalization in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit to community care

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Abstract

Background: A preterm infant is a baby born before 37 weeks of pregnancy have been completed. Preterm infants are characterized by underdeveloped physiological systems. Therefore, preterm infants are at an increased risk of neurodevelopmental, cognitive, and behavioral difficulties. Preterm infants and their parents are exposed to stress during their stay in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). During this period, both the parents and the infant receive emotional and physical support. Yet, after being discharged, there is a need to maintain professional treatment and guidance for the infant and family. The literature describes intervention programs for preterm babies and their parents in different countries. These intervention programs can be helpful for the infant's development and for their parents' emotional health. Surprisingly, in Israel no such structured community program currently exists.

Objective: To describe the characteristics of programs that exist in other countries, and create a support program here in Israel for preterm babies and their parents to guide them through the transition from the hospital to the community.

Methods: The first part of this study presents a literature review of studies representing different intervention programs from recent years from all over the world.

An intervention program was then developed based on these studies, including individual as well as group meetings. The program was rated by five reviewers with long-standing experience in the management of preterm infants. The assessment was made using twelve questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale plus three open questions. The second part of this article briefly describes the final version of the suggested program.

Discussion and Conclusions: The proposed program received support from the reviewers and was found to have positive potential for implementation. The feedback showed an average above 3 for the different sections of the questionnaire (the maximum score was 4), with the highest results given to questions regarding the suitability of the staff members who will serve as the program's guidance counselors, the contents, and the reviewers' recommendation for families to participate. The original version of the program underwent several changes following the feedback, including the addition of a meeting between the parents and staff at the child's NICU, as well as some changes in the content of the group meetings.

In order to examine the program's effectiveness and its suitability for health services in Israel, it must actually be implemented, and if necessary, further changes should be made based on parents' feedback on the program. A study should be conducted in which the program is tested among several groups of preterm infants and their parents, so that a comparison based on objective outcome measures can be made between program participants and control groups.