



Information for Grandparents

Neonatal Services

Congratulations on the birth of your mokopuna/grandchild!

Whether it's a boy or a girl, your first or your 10th mokopuna, it's a joyous occasion to welcome a new pēpi/baby to the world!

If your mokopuna is in the Neonatal Unit you're probably feeling a mix of emotions. The following information has been written to help you support your son or daughter while their pēpi goes through the neonatal journey.

First steps

Celebrate! Even though it's scary, it's okay to share your excitement about your new mokopuna. The whole whanau/family can be so worried that they forget to share the joy of the pēpi birth.

Second, understand the emotional strain this is causing your son or daughter and try to put your own needs aside. Many grandparents want to be involved with their new mokopuna, but the Neonatal Unit is a whole different experience. Respect your son or daughter's wishes, as hard as this sometimes is.

Third, learn about the Neonatal Service and about prematurity. Doing this in your own time will save your child the strain of having to explain things over and over, which is a burden for many Neonatal Unit parents. You can access information on the Neonatal Service website which may be helpful:

[Neonatal Service | Te Whatu Ora - Waitaha Canterbury \(cdhb.health.nz\)](https://www.cdhb.health.nz/Neonatal-Service)

Information on some websites is not always supportive. Avoid sharing scary stories as this will only add to your child's worry about their pēpi.

What are some common emotions that grandparents feel?

You may feel some conflicting emotions after your mokopuna is born. All of the feelings listed below are normal and many grandparents experience at least some of them. As your mokopuna gets stronger, some of the negative feelings may lessen.

- Anxiety and fear over your mokopuna medical condition.
- Anger over the difficulties your mokopuna, and your son or daughter, are facing.
- Worry about how your son or daughter is holding up.

- Helplessness over your inability to help your mokopuna or ease your child's distress.
- Pride and joy over the latest addition to your whānau.
- Hope that your mokopuna will have the bright future that you and his/her parents want for him/her.

What to do

There are many awesome things you can do to be a thoughtful and supportive grandparent. Neonatal parents are generally so overwhelmed that they often can't say what it is they need, or they are too tired to ask for help. So, when you offer your help, be specific. Give them an exact day you're available, give them a few specific things you could do to help, such as:

- Offer to **watch any other mokopuna**
- Offer to **drive** new mums to the neonatal
- Offer to **cook meals**.
- Offer to **clean the house/do the laundry**
- **Keep in touch**
- **Celebrate all the little milestones** your mokopuna achieves, eg. transitioning from incubator to cot, coming off the ventilator/oxygen, each weight gain, first feeding attempt.
- Keep an eye out for **changes in mood that may be of concern**, which can affect either parent. Support them to recognise when it's time to get help from a doctor or therapist.

Also remember to:

- **Respect the parents' decisions.** They will have to make many decisions about their pēpi care. Some of these decisions are very difficult and your son or daughter may ask your advice. While your advice is important to the parents, they may not always accept it. Even if you don't agree with their decision, remember they are trying to do what they think is best under difficult circumstances.

Keep offering to do these things throughout the Neonatal Unit stay. Many parents find circumstances challenging after the initial excitement wears off. Neonatal stays can span weeks and even months, and they will still appreciate help and support for the entire time. Please don't be discouraged or offended if your son/daughter declines your offers of help – parents all have different ways of coping with the stress of a pēpi in the Neonatal Unit.

What to say

More important than saying anything at all is listening. Asking, “How are you holding up?” and then listening will be incredibly supportive. Celebrate every success your mokopuna has, whether it’s breathing for themselves, gaining weight or moving from an incubator to a cot.

Also, these things are great:

- "Congratulations!"
- "Look how sweet s/he is!"
- "S/he looks so strong!"
- "S/he looks like mum/dad/grandma/grandad ..."
- "How are you holding up?"
- "Is there anything I can do to help?"
- “Would you like me to update the rest of the whānau for you? What would you like them to know?”

What *not* to say

So many people inadvertently say things that are upsetting to parents of premature pēpi. If you’re trying to be sensitive and thoughtful, don’t worry about exactly what to say. But here are some classic comments that parents of premature pēpi dislike:

- **"S/He’s so tiny."** Parents are very aware of how tiny their pēpi is, and it’s a source of great worry. Try to focus on strengths and positives.
- **"Will s/he be ok?"** Parents wonder the same thing and don’t have an answer. Time will tell. Focus on the now and on the positives.
- **"What did you do wrong? / What caused this prematurity?"** They wonder the same thing and are probably feeling terrible guilt about it – which is misguided. There is nothing that modern medicine can truly do to prevent prematurity, and most often it happens despite a mother doing everything ‘right’. So, don’t add to her guilt by implying that she could have prevented it. Even if you thought the mother could have done a ‘better’ job when pregnant, now is not the time to add that burden to a worried whānau.
- **"At least the pēpi is with great ‘babysitters’."** Sure, neonatal nurses and doctors are highly trained, but nobody wants their own pēpi to be cared for by someone else.
- **"I don’t know how you’re doing it! / I wouldn’t be strong enough to handle this."** They wish they weren’t, and it makes them feel more

alone because everyone thinks they're holding up well when in fact they may feel like they're falling apart.

- **"At least you didn't have to gain all that weight."** Nearly all mothers would rather gain all the weight than watch their pēpi face challenges.
- **"When will s/he be in a cot?" / "When will s/he be able to feed for themselves?"** Parents want to know the same thing! It is important to focus on all the small milestones their pēpi achieves as they grow, as they are very exciting steps in their pēpi journey! Shifting their focus to questions they can't answer increases their anxiety levels. Celebrate with them when each milestone happens.
- **"When will s/he come home?"** It seems innocent enough, and it's something you will be curious about. This is your mokopuna! But parents are 100 times more curious about it than you are, and the doctors and nurses simply can't tell them when their pēpi will be ready to go home. Parents of premature pēpi almost always hate this question, so just avoid it if you can.

Bring a gift?

Absolutely!

Grandparents are notorious for showering gifts upon their little mokopuna, and premature pēpi deserve them too! Many grandparents worry they'll get the 'wrong' thing. Here are some gifts that almost always bring much-needed joy:

- Premature clothes (but not too many – they grow quickly!)
- Stuffed animals (but these often can't go to the Neonatal Unit for infection control reasons)
- Gift cards for the hospital cafeteria
- Gift cards for petrol, groceries, restaurants
- Books to read aloud to pēpi
- Care packages filled with snacks, a journal, hand lotion, and other goodies
- A massage or day at the spa, or any treat you know your child loves

Remember!

Once your mokopuna goes home from the Neonatal Unit, s/he can still be medically fragile. They may have left the Neonatal Unit, but they often require special care and attention to help them succeed at home. Your son/daughter will have been given a lot of information from the neonatal team on how to best care for their pēpi. Your son/daughter will be the best guides for you in how to hold/feed/care for your mokopuna, so make sure you ask them if there are any special considerations you need to keep in mind when helping them to care for their pēpi.

Congratulations on becoming a grandparent!
You are an important part of your mokopuna life
and we look forward to celebrating it with you

Te Whatu Ora
Health New Zealand

Waitaha Canterbury