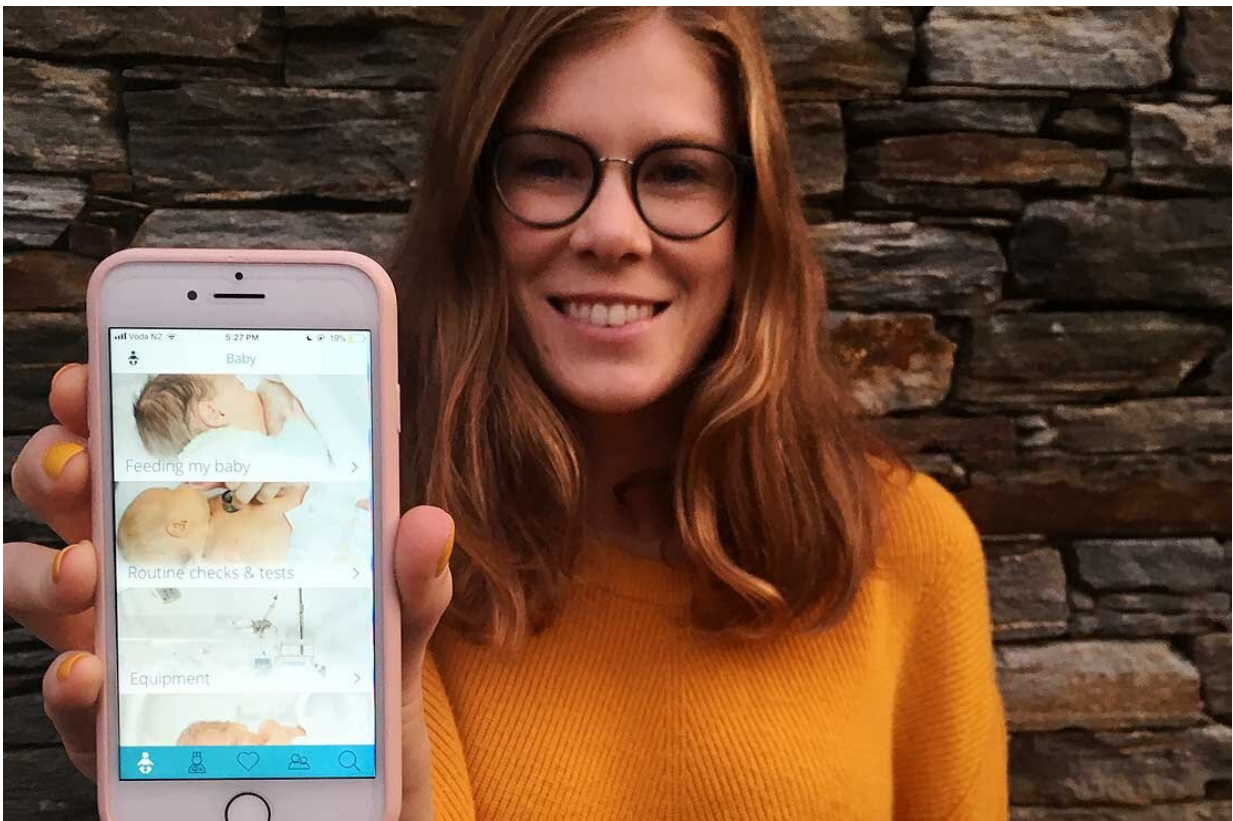


Study looks at app for parents of premature babies

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Clinical psychology doctoral researcher Charlotte Gibson with the Babble app for parents of babies in neonatal care. Credit: Massey University

Being a new parent of a newborn admitted to a neonatal unit is stressful and challenging. A mobile health app designed to inform and support

parents with babies in neonatal care is the focus of a Massey University clinical psychology student's study.

Charlotte Gibson is undertaking doctoral research to find out more about the Babble app, created by MidCentral District Health Board and launched in 2016. She is reaching out to parents who have used the app to take part in a survey to assess how Babble helped them. Her findings, she hopes, will provide evidence of how the app can make a difference so it can be used more widely and refined if necessary.

The app provides a constant source of information for parents and families who may have difficulty getting time with busy medical staff to ask questions. As well as a digital tour of the unit and explanations of medical terminology, processes, equipment, routine tests and checks, parents can upload their own photos, share journal entries and stories with other users, and get information on support services after discharge from the unit.

"Research shows that being more confident and informed are protective factors in managing stress," says Ms Gibson, who is based in the School of Psychology at Massey's Auckland campus, in Albany. This is critical, she says, because "parents with [babies](#) in neonatal care are at much greater risk of post-natal depression."

Babble, free to download through the App Store or Google Play, has been used mainly by parents in MidCentral and Manukau/Counties health districts where it has been rolled out, as well as others around New Zealand who have heard about it through their midwives.

Parents' needs vital for positive future

Not being able to cuddle their new baby is just one of the hardest disruptions to the expectations of new parents. "This often follows high-

risk pregnancy or difficult birth, so there's already that extra element of stress," Ms Gibson says. "Parents find that their needs compete with those of the infant—a [neonatal unit](#) is a hospital for babies and the priority isn't the parents experience."

One mum told her most stressful part is not so much the neonatal unit but "seeing her baby and not knowing what his future life will be like. It hit me that it's not just this point in time—it affects the future."

Ms Gibson has also surveyed parents of newborns in [neonatal care](#) who have not had access to the app to find out more about their experiences and understand what support would have helped

She is currently seeking parents whose baby has been admitted to a neonatal unit, including special care baby units (SCBU) or neonatal intensive care units (NICU), in New Zealand within the last twelve months, and who have used the Babble app.

"The need for such an app is timely," says Ms Gibson. "globally more babies are being admitted to neonatal units because there are more older parents and higher use of IVF, which can result in multiple births needing specialist care. Anecdotally, neonatal unit admissions are rising due to the impact of drugs, alcohol and poverty," she says. One of nurse told her: "you can see what's playing out in society being played out in the neonatal unit."

Ms Gibson studied socialising behaviours of 10-month old babies for her undergraduate honours degree in psychology (at the University of Auckland) and says she is "very passionate about early development and family work—I feel those areas are so pivotal to how we grow."

One of her supervisors, Dr. Kirsty Ross, a clinical psychologist at Massey's Psychology Clinic on Massey's Manawatū campus, has been a

mother to two premature babies (now healthy teenagers). "It's quite a different entry into parenthood," says Dr. Ross. Often parents are too emotionally overwhelmed and sleep-deprived to take in information from medical staff. Having access to the Babble app means they can seek information whenever they need it, she says.

Babble app creator, Dr. Nathalie de Vries, a MidCentral District Health Board paediatrician, says the app "has been a great information source for [parents](#) who have a baby in the Neonatal Unit, and their Whānau. One family shared feedback with us, saying the app was 'very helpful for our family. This is the first time our family is blessed with a premature baby and Babble has provided valuable information which helped us gain insight and understanding about the overall care of our granddaughter.'"

Provided by Massey University

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