

New app allows NICU families to 'visit' baby during COVID-19 pandemic

April 1 2020, by Kristin Samuelson



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With the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak, many hospitals and neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) are limiting the number of people who can visit newborn babies to reduce the risk of

contamination. At Northwestern Medicine's Prentice Women's Hospital, that means only one parent at a time can be with their newborn in the NICU.

"It can be either the mom or the dad but not at the same time," said Dr. Craig Garfield, professor of pediatrics and medical social sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a pediatrician at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago. "It's heartbreaking."

But on Monday (March 30), Garfield and his collaborators at Prentice began rolling out a [smartphone app](#) to all NICU parents in hopes of easing the stress of parenting a baby in the NICU.

The app, [SMART NICU2HOME](#), provides a platform that allows parents to check in on their babies from afar, sending updates throughout the day on their baby's vital signs (breathing, weight, bowel movements, medications, etc.) and personalized information and education, such as common NICU terminology and who is caring for their baby at any given point.

What does the app provide?

- Updates throughout the day on the baby's vital signs (breathing, weight, bowel movements, medications, etc.)
- Personalized information and education, such as common NICU terminology and who is caring for the baby at any given point
- Emotional support, including stress-reducing techniques
- Private social media account to connect with friends and [family](#) and share updates about the baby

The app features built-in emotional support for families, such as stress-reducing techniques like how to practice mindfulness, and allows parents

to share access to the app with their [family members](#) and post updates on their baby's progress via a private social media account.

"They aren't at the bedside but they can still get that vital information every parent craves, and it helps fill the gap since family and friends used to be able to visit in person," said Garfield, who began developing the app with his collaborator Young Seok Lee, adjunct professor of medical social sciences at Feinberg, long before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Garfield and Lee originally designed the app several years ago for parents of [babies](#) born prematurely (34 weeks and earlier) to help them stay connected with their newborns in the NICU when they couldn't be by their side 100% of the time. They had been testing the app in a research study to see how parents reacted to it. With the COVID-19 pandemic—and the restricted access to NICU newborns that accompanied it—they decided to offer it to all families in the NICU, working all last week to update the sign-up process and content delivery.

"These are unprecedented times," said Lee. "The stress of the families was going to be really unparalleled, and we knew this app already worked from our research phase, so we are glad that we could share the benefits of this app with a larger community of NICU infants and their families."

Starting Monday, bedside nurses began distributing flyers to parents in the NICU that help them learn more about the app and how it works. Parents can request an invitation and will be sent a secure code to download the app and connect information with their baby in the NICU. The team even rolled out a contact-free enrollment process to reduce exposures for [parents](#) and staff.

More information: For more information, see smartnicu2home.com/

Provided by Northwestern University

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