

Telemedicine platform teaches parents how to play with their preterm babies

September 21 2020, by Katharine Gammon



Credit: Julia Rendleman

When babies are born early—at or before 32 weeks—they are at risk for a myriad of issues in life, including developmental and learning disabilities. And while they receive lots of care in a neonatal intensive

care unit (NICU), when they eventually go home, there's a huge gap of time before they receive services at home, at about four to eight months.

That's why Stacey Dusing created SPEEDI, which stands for Supporting Play Exploration and Early Developmental Intervention. The intervention is designed to scaffold [parents](#) to engage with their [babies](#), bit by bit. "The biggest challenge was that parents were not really trained on what to do with their baby at home—and they were imitating the NICU environment, where babies mainly stayed in the crib," she said.

Now, Dusing has been awarded a grant, in collaboration with the University of Melbourne, to study [telemedicine](#) for infants born preterm. Dusing and her Australian counterparts will enroll 450 infants and their families in Victoria, Australia, into this clinical trial. Half of the [infants](#) will participate in usual care; the other half will receive intervention in person while they're at the hospitals and then moving into telemedicine to support them once they are [home](#). "It's teaching parents how to play with a baby in a way that supports development," she says.

The platform was designed a year ago to be delivered remotely, and now with a pandemic raging, it makes even more sense to do therapy that way.

Study participants will have a telemedicine visit every month to work with a therapist—but they will also have access to an app that has information and videos to help remind them of the lessons. And during each session, the therapist can actually see how the baby is progressing in skills.

Dusing hypothesizes that the SPEEDI intervention will result in better motor and cognitive skills at 12 and 24 months of age. They also hope to see lower levels of stress in parents. "The combination is a huge thing because these parents are at high risk for struggles with stress," she said.

For decades, Dusing practiced as a neonatal physical therapist, and it is an area of absolute passion for her. "I spent a lot of time in parents' homes with new babies, and it was shocking to me to see how little parents knew about supporting the baby's development," she said. "They were so overwhelmed." But she saw firsthand how the dynamic shifted when therapists gave parents ideas about how to take specific action.

She added that this is one of the first grants to investigate how telemedicine works, compared with traditional visits in this population of families with babies born early—questions that have only become more vital during the pandemic. "We are at the forefront of being able to evaluate the question of telemedicine with this group," she said. "Part of why this is important is if we can support babies from the very beginning maybe those kids will have fewer problems later in life."

Provided by University of Southern California

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