



Photographs Helped Mom Cope with Babies in NICU

By Mary Jo Miller, M.S., TxP2P

When Amber Collier gave birth to her twin girls, Eden and Priscilla, at 33 weeks she was able to be with the babies in the hospital for 4 days. Then she was discharged. For the next month she drove 20 minutes everyday to be with them in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), but returned home at night. To help her stay connected and to bond with the babies she turned to something she had been doing all her life, photography. Amber has always loved taking pictures. In her family she was the one documenting family celebrations and events. Although she is not a professional photographer, in her work as a graphic designer she has studied the art of taking photos. Photographs are very much a part of her career and personal life.

Because of Amber's history with photography it was natural for her to pick up her camera (a regular digital camera not a professional one, Amber emphasizes) to document her babies from the moment of their birth. Her husband, Brian, also got in on capturing images of his new daughters. Immediately after the twins were born she asked him to start taking pictures of the girls. "Thankfully, I've taken pictures my entire life to document happy and hard times like this. In the midst of our mess, I was still able to capture some very special moments that will never happen again in my lifetime. The pictures were therapeutic then, but now they are even more precious. They bring me great joy, pride, and confidence, in myself, my children, and my family. They truly are priceless. I look at the girls' preemie pictures more than any others still," Amber writes on her website, Preemie Prints, www.preemieprints.org.

Nancy Sheppard, Perinatal Outreach Coordinator for Seton Family Hospitals and LCSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker) with 20 years experience working in the NICU says "anything that will help parents feel closer to their babies and try to bridge the physical separation, which is enormous, is always a really good thing." She noted that photos are very helpful for families that don't live close to the hospital. Taking photographs of a new baby is normal and in the midst of a traumatizing experience like giving birth to a premature baby or having a full term baby hospitalized, showing photographs to family and friends can be a normalizing experience.

Sheppard noted that professionals are always looking for ways to help families feel closer to their babies. The days and weeks after a normal birth are usually a time for nesting and settling in to new baby routines. This natural bonding and attachment period between babies and families can be interrupted or inhibited with an NICU stay unless particular attention is given to that process. Professionals are tuned into the medical needs of the baby but they are also very aware of the emotional needs of the family. It is important that they support the family taking photos, bring things from home, playing soft music or reading to the baby.

Texas Parent to Parent

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During the stressful month the girls were hospitalized, Amber found the photographs comforted her, helped her deal with stress and facilitated her breast milk production. Amber was pumping for milk every three hours around the clock. She found it difficult when she was away from the babies. Looking at and holding her photos during her pumping sessions helped. It was the closest thing to being with them.

She and her husband established a routine of almost every day stopping at Walgreens to print the most recent photographs and Amber would make booklets to look at and keep close to her. She believes the photos helped during the stay in the hospital and later, as well. Amber feels they empowered her, helped her remember and gave her courage. She attributes the photographs to leading her to help others going through an NICU experience.

“Mothers who go through the whole [NICU] experience....it empowers you, if you don’t have something to remember it by it can kind of fade away. And so for me to have those pictures throughout this whole year and after going through the whole experience I was drawn to doing something with premature babies,” said Amber.

Because of her experience Amber started a non-profit organization, Preemie Prints, to offer information, support, complimentary photography, gift bags, and prayers to families who have a premature or ill baby in a NICU. Preemie Prints serves the Bryan College Station, Waco, Houston and Temple areas.

In addition they offer complimentary photography to families with children who have:

- health conditions due to being born prematurely,
- childhood illnesses or diseases,
- babies born out of crisis or teenage pregnancies,
- babies and children recently adopted or those in foster care and
- children with special health care needs.

They also offer free photography to nonprofit organizations, hospitals, and churches who hold events for or in honor of any of these babies/children.

Contact Amber through the website, www.preemieprints.org or 979-635-0825 or preemieprints@gmail.com.

Through her work with Preemie Prints Amber encourages moms and dads to photograph their babies throughout their NICU stay. She emphasizes the importance of documenting the baby early on and to not wait until the baby looks older. The photos can provide an important record of progress and changes. Also, she believes parents will want the photos when the baby is older so you can tell the entire birth story.

On the other hand Amber acknowledges sometimes it is difficult, or photography might not be secondhand to some people. Amber is working with a mom right now who wasn’t able to photograph her baby born at 24 weeks until 3 weeks after the birth. She notes everyone’s comfort level is different.

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Have you had a similar experience to Amber's? What are your thoughts about using photography to help cope with the stress of an NICU stay? Join the TxP2P listserv for families with children who begin life in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). You must have a Yahoo account to join the listserv. If you'd like to join the group, send an email to TxP2P-NICUNetwork@yahoogroups.com or Susan@txp2p.org.

As Amber's story illustrates, dealing with the emotions and stress of having a baby in the NICU can take time, sometimes years. TxP2P is currently recruiting parent volunteers to provide support to families who have babies who started their life as a "preemie" in an NICU or have experienced a NICU hospitalization due to a baby's disability or medical condition. If are interested contact Susan Prior (Susan.Prior@txp2p.org) or Patty Geisinger (Patty@txp2p.org)

Mary Jo Miller is a former Special Education teacher and consultant with over 25 years experience in Early Childhood Intervention. She is currently working part-time for TxP2P on the NICU Network. Contact Mary Jo at unobug52@michaelandmary.net.



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Sidebar to the story

Amber's Tips for Photographing Babies in the NICU

- Get up close and personal; take close-up photos of hospital bracelets, hats or bands, feet and hands etc.
- Take photos of parents holding the baby
- Be sensitive to over stimulating the baby with flash photography. Turn off the flash if needed.
- Put something next to the baby for scale purposes, e.g. a hand or stuffed animal



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