PROJECT INFORMATION

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Testing a Peer-Support Program for Parents of Infants Going Home from the NICU

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What was the research about?

When infants are born early or have health problems, they get special care in the neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU, of a hospital. After leaving the NICU, infants can continue to have serious healthcare needs. Parents often have high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression during and after their infants' NICU stay.

In this study, the research team tested a peer navigator program to improve parents' mental health and confidence in caring for their infants. Peer navigators were parents with experience having a child in the NICU. The team compared parents who were in the peer support program with parents who weren't in the program.

The research team looked at parents' mental health and confidence. The team also looked at the infants' health, hospital stays, and vaccines in the year after leaving the NICU.

What were the results?

After one year, parents who were and weren't in the peer-support program reported similar decreases in stress, anxiety, and depression and increases in confidence in caring for their infants. Infant health, hospital stays, and vaccines also didn't differ between the two groups.

Who was in the study?

The study included 300 parents of infants discharged home from the NICU at a hospital in Washington, DC.

About half of the infants stayed in the NICU for less than 17 days. Of the parents, 44 percent were black, 39 percent were white, 8 percent were mixed race, 6 percent were Asian, and 3 percent were American Indian or Pacific Islander. The average age was 30, and 89 percent were women.

What did the research team do?

The research team assigned parents by chance to one of two groups. Parents in one group received support from peer navigators for one year. Hospital staff trained the peer navigators to provide support to parents in the study. Peer navigators contacted parents via phone, email, or in person to

- Learn their needs
- Connect them to resources, such as support groups
- Help them make and keep doctor appointments
- Answer their questions about insurance coverage and medical equipment

All parents in the study received a notebook to organize health records and information on community resources. The notebook also helped parents organize doctor appointments.

Parents filled out surveys at the start of the study and again one year later. The surveys asked about parents' mental health and confidence in caring for their

infants and hospital visits. The research team reviewed information on vaccines from the children's health records. A psychologist assessed infant health.

Parents, doctors, and peer navigators helped design the study.

What were the limits of the study?

Not all parents in the program received the same amount and quality of support from the peer navigators. Results might have been different if peer-navigator support had been the same for all parents. Less than half of the infants were premature; many

had NICU stays of less than one week. Results may have differed if the study included more infants who were premature or had longer NICU stays.

Future research could look at other ways to help parents and infants after leaving the NICU.

How can people use the results?

Hospitals can use the results when considering ways to help families after they leave the NICU.

To learn more about this project, visit www.pcori.org/Fratantoni266.