

Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse NICU Families



Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) serve families from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Many families speak multiple languages and some feel most comfortable speaking in a language other than English. Providing culturally- and linguistically-responsive care to families can help ensure every family feels welcomed and well cared for. It is critical that parents understand their baby's medical conditions and needs in order to provide the best care and manage the stressful experiences associated with a NICU stay.

Strategies to support linguistically diverse families in the NICU:



Inform parents of their rights to an interpreter

Many families may not be aware of the possibility of using an interpreter every time they communicate with a doctor or provider that doesn't speak their preferred language. Make sure families understand that they have the right to an interpreter and inform them of the steps needed to request one, as well as how you will help them to secure one.



Do not assume parents understand the information that was shared because an interpreter was involved

Despite involving highly skilled interpreters, cultural nuances can be missed or go unacknowledged during important meetings between providers and families. It's important that families have a clear understanding of their baby's medical diagnoses, prognosis, surgical procedures, and medical care. When possible, avoid using jargon and medical terminology. Visuals, such as timelines and step-by-step instructions, are useful for all families, regardless of their preferred language. Using both spoken words and visual information can help parents better understand their baby's care and medical procedures. When these materials are not available in a family's preferred language, send materials to be translated and keep a copy for your unit that you may share with families that speak the same language in the future.



Exercise patience

Families experiencing a hospitalization for their baby may feel overwhelmed and confused. Navigating the medical system in a language different from their preferred one adds even more complexity. It can be helpful to repeat information and take care not to be hurried in the delivery of medical information. Clear communication in the NICU will help parents better understand their baby's medical needs and will also help the medical team be able to build trust and enhance communication with the baby's family.



Some additional cultural considerations:

1 If you are unsure of how to pronounce a parent or child's name, it's okay to ask

You can say something like, "I want to make sure I am pronouncing your name correctly. Could you repeat/pronounce it for me?" and "I am going to try my best to pronounce it correctly but please feel free to correct my pronunciation at any time. Pronouncing your/your baby's name correctly is important to me."



2 Using the correct pronunciation of the baby's name shows respect for the family

The name a family selects for their baby can be intimately tied to their family, culture, and family history. Refrain from asking, "What's their American name? Do they have a nickname instead? Can I call them (First Initial)?" when the name is unfamiliar to you. As a provider in a NICU setting, you may be one of the first individuals to actually use their baby's name. Try connecting over the meaning of the baby's name.

3 Asking parents about important family values and traditions can be a meaningful way to respectfully understand cultural nuances and values for each family

Use family values and traditions to inform how you praise and recognize families' efforts while in the NICU (if appropriate). For example, you may ask families if you can use the same term of endearment they use with their child, or acknowledge important holidays in the family's culture.

4 In some cultures, extended family is expected to attend important events, such as the birth of a baby

Be mindful that extended family may be expected to attend or visit the hospital. Providers should give information about hospital visitation rules in a kind way and with an understanding of these cultural norms. Furthermore, staff can be mindful of upcoming holidays that may be relevant to families' beliefs and traditions.

