

NICU Family News



NICU Graduate Westley

The NICU Family News is produced by the Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) Family Advisory Council. It is designed to provide you with information we hope you will find useful during and after your family's NICU stay.

DID YOU KNOW?

Holding your baby to your bare skin (also called **skin to skin care** or **kangaroo care**) in the NICU has a number of benefits for baby and is one of the most comforting things a parent can do for their child. No NICU equipment can substitute for doing skin to skin care. Talk to your nurse to see if your baby is able to do skin to skin with you. For the well-being of babies born less than 32 weeks gestation, you will have to wait until after their first three days of life.

What is Early Intervention (EI) and Which Babies Need it?

A very common question many of our NICU families ask our staff as their baby/babies are getting close to going home is about whether or not their baby will need early intervention and how they will know if their baby needs it. Keep in mind that the majority of babies that graduate from our NICU do not need Early Intervention (EI) but some do, so what follows is some information we hope will help you with these questions.

In NJ, EI is a statewide program that can evaluate and provide needed developmental services for youngsters from birth to 3 years old. A parent or doctor or other health care worker can request an evaluation for a child in this age range and an EI worker can be scheduled to come to your house for an evaluation.

Since every baby develops at their own pace (and with preemies that pace may be delayed by roughly how early they were born), it is sometimes difficult to know if your baby is "developmentally delayed" and needs an evaluation. Skills such as taking a first step, smiling for the first time and waving bye-bye are called "developmental milestones" and when babies meet these milestones is important. However, some babies simply speak, crawl, walk and relate to others later than other babies, but there are some general things babies should be doing by certain ages and all pediatricians should be checking on these developmental milestones each time you take them for a check-up. So, it is important to keep regularly scheduled appointments with your pediatrician and ask them if they feel your baby is meeting their milestones in an acceptable time frame. You can also see a listing of these expected milestones, by age, in the EI Pamphlets we have in the NICU Family Library or at www.cdc.gov (in English and Spanish).

Because there are ranges of time for when babies/toddlers meet their milestones there is no set answer about some of this, especially early on (say in the first 3-6 months of life). However if you, or your doctor, have concerns about milestones seeming to be late in several areas or if your child seems very behind in one area reach out to Early Intervention for an evaluation. **They can be contacted at 888-653-4463 and you can find out more about all of this at nj.gov/health/fuss/eyes.**

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Let's Get to Know: Sister Gale Pankowski

CBMC Spiritual Care Provider

What does the Spiritual Care Department do for patients and families?

The Spiritual Care Department members are spiritual specialists who are part of the hospital's health care team. Our professional clinical chaplains are trained to help meet the spiritual, emotional, and religious needs of patients and family members unique to the health care environment. Our department includes therapeutic musicians who provide healing harp music to patients, visitors and staff. A harpist usually visits the NICU once a week during the day and can be requested by contacting the Spiritual Care Department at 973-322-5015.

How long have you been working at CBMC and how long have you been visiting the NICU?

I have been working at the hospital and visiting the NICU for 15 years. At the beginning, a few doctors questioned why I was coming. I see it as a way to connect with the parents who are concerned about the well-being of their little one. I have always loved children. I was a first-grade teacher for 20 years. It was the greatest job to have them arrive on the first day not knowing how to read and leave in June reading all kinds of books. I have just transferred this love to the littlest ones here. Seeing the smallest ones grow each day, leave and grow into beautiful children is a great joy.

What do you do when you come to the NICU?

When I visit the NICU, I try to establish a non-threatening relationship with the parents. Entering into their joy and their concerns for the health and well-being of their child. The NICU can be over whelming at first. Parents need to feel at home and comfortable so their child can prosper.

In your words, what does the Spiritual Care Department offer?

The Spiritual Care Department offers support. I feel that is the biggest part of what we do. We cannot change things but can be present to help and support all in need. We also have chaplains of various faith traditions to help the families with whatever their needs may be.



How can NICU families access those services?

Families can reach the Spiritual Care Department (24/7) by calling 973-322-5015. Also, I do spend some time each day visiting the children and parents in the NICU. In case of an emergency, we can be reached by dialing 0 and talking to the operator.

Where is the Chapel located and what are the hours?

The Chapel is open all the time and is located on the ground floor off of the Central Lobby, right before the Cafeteria. It's a place for quiet prayer. The offices for the various chaplains are located in the same place.

Do you have any suggestions or advice for NICU families?

For the families, just know I am here for you and your baby. I want to support you in any way possible. You are loved and the greatest joy is to see you and your baby grow healthy and strong.

Anything else you would like to say about?

Sometimes, there are days that are very sad. I want to be present to you and your family in that time. I want you to know you are loved and your baby will always love you in return and in a different way.

Would you be willing to share something the NICU families would be surprised to know about you?

I belong to a family of four veterinarians! I have two nieces who played women's ice hockey for Princeton and Wisconsin and the USA team! I love ice hockey and animals. I also live in a large house with 76 other Sisters. They too are a joy!

A Long NICU Stay with a Happy Ending

After a near-perfect first two trimesters of my pregnancy, I began experiencing bleeding at 24 weeks. There were no red flags or anything in my experience that I believed caused it, but it was truly an unwelcome surprise. After seven days of on-and-off complications, I was admitted to an area hospital. Initial ultrasounds showed a lack of protective fluid for the baby. The potential for a very early delivery led doctors to recommend we be transferred to Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center (CBMC) for their specialized NICU for micro-preemie babies.



Westley in the NICU and now at two years old.

Once at CBMC, our little boy stayed strong for four days of trips to and from Labor & Delivery and the Antepartum Unit. Then, on Halloween day, Westley J. was born at 25 weeks and 5 days via emergency C-section. Special shout out to the Obstetrics and OR team that mobilized faster than I could have imagined after a terrifying placental abruption and related serious blood clot condition.

The words that rang the truest during Westley's journey were that a NICU stay is often like a roller coaster ride filled with ups and downs and the progress being made does not always go in a straight line. Many days felt "smooth" and "no news was good news," but there were also days that included apnea scares, IVs, PICC lines, blood transfusions, steroids, diuretics, antibiotics, a move to the isolation wing, radiology testing, respiratory machines and too many wires to recount now. All this was in an effort to help Wes grow and go home a healthy baby boy. It really put into perspective all a woman's body is doing during a usual nine-month pregnancy.

Since he was so strong throughout his NICU stay, I felt confident that Wes would be home by his due date in early February. But, re-intubations and a chronic lung disease diagnosis were wake-up calls that this would be an even longer and more difficult process than we had hoped. He did have little wins along the way, but

they sometimes felt difficult to celebrate when it seemed like we kept getting an overwhelming amount of disappointing news.

We felt our greatest allies in the NICU were the amazing nurses. They spent the most time with Westley at the bedside and they knew and understood his daily care better than we could have imagined. This seemed especially true for the babies that have a lengthy NICU stay, like Wes. Wes's daytime primary nurse, Laurie, came to our rescue countless times and advocated for him when it came to making feedings and formula decisions, which we felt were really holding him back. Her expertise and tenacity were the extra push needed to get Westley home. Our primary night nurse, Mackenzie, was with Wes on the night he was born and she even came in on her day off to see him go home, almost 5 months later. It was very touching.

Westley was discharged after spending 144 days in the CBMC NICU. The fog of emotions that weighed heavy on us as a NICU family sometimes made it feel like the end of our stay would never come. But it did, and we will be forever grateful for that. Now I can barely

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Important Phone Numbers

NICU: 973-322-5300

NICU Clinical Director:
973-322-8938

NICU Social Worker: 973-322-5503

NICU Case Managers:
973-322-5909/973-322-2678

Birth Certificate Office:
973-322-5327

Lactation Consultants:
973-322-9088

NICU High Risk Infant Follow-Up Program: 973-322-2631

Spiritual Care Department:
973-322-5015

Want to Help the Family Advisory Council?

The FAC is made up of graduate parents dedicated to helping new NICU parents. We meet monthly to discuss ways to do this. We're always looking for recent graduate parents to share their experiences and ideas to make our NICU the best it can be. We welcome your ideas and participation.

What is Early Intervention (EI)... (continued from page 1)

If the EI team sends someone to your home to do an evaluation, they will gather information from the family and from observing the child in several areas of development (such as communication, feeding, behavior, walking/movement, vision, and hearing). That trained professional will then determine if the child is significantly delayed compared to other children the same age and in need of services. They will also recommend the types and amounts of services needed.

Families are often concerned with the cost of these services for their baby. Keep in mind, there is usually not any cost associated with having the EI team evaluate your baby and if they think the child needs services there are usually co-pays dependent on the families income and health insurance. They try to work with the families to get the most help to these children during these important first three years of life. Again, to learn more about any of this go to <http://nj.gov/health/fhs/eis>.

A Long NICU Stay... (continued from page 3)

remember the "hold" music that used to haunt my dreams after calling the unit countless times to check in on our little guy. It's difficult to revisit such painful memories, but it is also a very important part of Wes' history. The incredible team that cared for him and saved his life (and mine) are a part of his story too. All NICU graduates deserve the superhero treatment because they are the bravest and strongest little souls.

Today, Westley is a sweet and vibrant two-year-old with the most infectious smile and laugh. He just wants to explore the outdoors and play with his beloved Hot Wheels cars. He doesn't stop singing and humming, just like his mother, and can't sit still, just like his father. We wouldn't have it any other way! **-Westley's Mom, Emma**

Save the Date: 25th Annual Miracle Walk Sunday, October 5, 2025

The 25th Anniversary Miracle Walk to benefit the Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center NICU will be held the morning of October 5 at Verona Park in Verona, NJ. It's sure to be a big celebration for the whole family so mark your calendar now!



To make a donation or learn more, visit:
miraclewalk.com or facebook.com/miraclewalk