

Tips for Friends and Family

From "Prematurity – Adjusting Your Dream" by Welma Lubbe

Friends and grandparents often feel they should guard their own thoughts, feelings and fears, since they are apprehensive of the impact their thoughts may have on you. Encourage grandparents to communicate and share their feelings with you. This can also help to clear up misunderstandings and help them to support you in a better and more appropriate way.

Take the mom or dad for coffee. Give them a voucher to go to the movies or to have a supper at a nice restaurant. Keep an eye on the couple's health, since they can easily neglect themselves.

Grandparents may also feel cheated from the 'grandparent moments', by not being able to hold and show off their new grandchild. They may feel anger, distress, sorrow, sadness and helplessness. Be cautious and ask your children what they need, rather than providing them with too much advice. Be supportive, hold and hug your children and offer them a shoulder to cry on.

Parents need space and privacy. There may come a time when they do not want to share all the information. Respect their wishes and the fact that at times parents need to spend time alone. Do not view exclusions or limits set as personal. They are only temporary boundaries for parents to protect themselves.

Give the new parents a small present when you congratulate them on their new little baby – something like a premature baby hat or a journal in which to write their experiences or a photo album. If they only receive your well-meant wishes of congratulation, they may mistakenly interpret it that you do not believe that their baby will live to enjoy the gift.

Do not kiss and cuddle the preemie when she is home, without her parents' permission. Be sensitive to her parents' overwhelming needs to protect her. Respect the boundaries set by the new parents. While your advice may be appreciated, respect the fact that their rules are valid for their home and parenting style.

Remember, the parent of a preemie can experience more heartache and suffering when they see other mothers with their new babies. This is especially true when they go in and out the hospital each day, or when they catch a glimpse of a pregnant woman. This hurt may be increased when the mom hears other birth stories or has to attend a baby shower. Family gatherings where babies are present, a breastfeeding mother, even watching a television program with babies can contribute to their pain. Understand that the mom may be reduced to tears when any of these things occur.

Visit the new parents once they are home, take along a meal for supper or cook some meals and freeze it for the new family.

Phone or sms weekly, even when everybody is already home. Keep up the contact and heartfelt interest. Do not simply disappear or wait for secondhand information. Offer to pass information to people 'approved' by the parents and find out how, when and what to send through.

Support the parents by buying premature baby products, which they may not be able to afford with the possible added financial strain they experience.

Be careful of inconsiderate comments such as, "Look how small she is. Don't you feed her?" Her parents struggled to get her this far and although you might mean well or even make the comment in jest, such comments can potentially be very hurtful.

Be understanding and compassionate. Do not compare the parents' experience with another experience involving hospitalisation or illness, because each case is unique.