

Kangaroo Care: High Touch in a High Tech World

by Judith P. Gundersen, RN, BSN, FACCE

Helping NICU infants and their parents interact is the focus of a new program at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

Kangaroo Care, or the "K" method, is an exciting alternative to standard modes of care for premature babies. Developed by Colombian neonatologists in 1979 as a response to shortages in incubating equipment, K care is named after the way marsupials care for their prematurely born young. The Colombian parents acted as human incubators by providing bodily warmth to their infants via skin-to-skin contact. Word of K care's value spread to neonatal clinicians in western Europe. Today, Kangaroo Care is practiced in Sweden, England, Italy, Germany, and Denmark.^{2,3}

What is K care and how does it work? The method is best described as an alternative care practice that gives infants skin-to-skin contact with parents, thus enabling them to share warmth and natural closeness. The parent, dressed in a loose fitting top, sits in a comfortable reclining chair next to the infant's isolette. The baby is placed directly on the parent's chest. (See Figure 1.) K care visits, which last 30 to 60 minutes each day, are conducted in a quiet environment with dimmed lighting and minimal interruption.

K Care Benefits

NICU nurses who work with K care say it's hard to decide whether the physical benefits of this method outweigh the psychological benefits, or if the reverse is true. Reports in the literature have indicated that Kangaroo Care soothes babies, promotes deeper sleep, and aids in temperature control.⁴⁻⁸ Babies who receive K care have shown increased oxygenation, weight gains, regular heart and respiratory rates, and fewer spells of apnea than their NICU neighbors who receive standard care.^{3,4} In addition to these benefits, longer duration of lactation has been noted in K care mothers, as has increased milk production.^{3,8}

Our nurses at Brigham and Women's Hospital have noticed that K care babies are able to breast-feed earlier. Economic

benefits have been noticed too: Babies on K care leave the NICU earlier, which frees up needed beds for other babies.

Parents Benefit Too

As a developmental intervention for parents, K care facilitates the transition from pregnancy to premature delivery. Brigham and Women's NICU nurse-in-charge Marie Field, RN, MSN, said that "NICU parents have undergone a great deal of stress. Everything they've hoped for has been taken away from them; they are suddenly and prematurely parents, and their baby is in a plastic box, attached to tubes and monitors with someone else responsible for his care."

Once their baby is in the NICU, Field says, parents may feel they have no direct role in their infant's care, or at best, that their role is unclear. Parents of NICU babies experience a loss of control as the high tech professionals take over.

Field recalls one mom who was teary at each NICU visit. Although not critically ill, her baby had been born prematurely at 34 weeks. This mom talked of the ache of separating from her baby too soon and said, "I wasn't ready and I miss her inside. K care 'gave me peace.'" Field calls it "a maximum plus for the mother's self-esteem."

Because Kangaroo Care provides parents with an intervention that is theirs alone to give, "It is the ultimate in individualized developmental care for premature infants," according to Field. (See Figure 2.) At the least, she explained, K care allows parents to plan meaningful visits and begin their commitment to the parenting role. They learn to evaluate how well the baby is doing and to see the visible signs of improvement. With K care, parents become part of the baby's life support system, part of the technology that helps the baby improve. For K care parents, the NICU becomes less frightening, and they can achieve a level of comfort during their visits. "The use of K care helps us to lessen the severity of the NICU experience," observes Brigham and Women's NICU Director, Steve Ringer, MD.

One K Care Success Story

In March 1992, "Good Morning America" featured a segment with Marie Field and NICU parents Marilyn and Ed Real of Nashua, New Hampshire. Marilyn Real held her daughter Catherine, whose story is one of the more dramatic in the



Figure 1. A mother and baby experience K care.



Figure 2. K care provides parents with an intervention that is theirs alone to give.

Brigham and Women's Hospital K care program.

Last October, Edward and Marilyn Real held their tiny daughter for what they thought was the last time: her O₂ levels were dangerously low, and her CO₂ levels were too high. One of the nurses suggested that the Reals try Kangaroo Care as a bereavement measure. As they held their daughter, her monitors began to show dramatic changes. For the next 36 hours, the

Reals took turns holding their daughter as her condition gradually improved.

Baby Catherine went home in February. Her father said "I believe if it hadn't been for the nurses' letting us hold her, she wouldn't have made it." Field cites other success stories, such as Baby Zachary who self-extubated the day after his first K care.

Is K care magical? Field offers this observation: "Any scientist would objec-

tively say no, but the fact is that each and every parent who has used K care has experienced changes that left them feeling it was their contribution that helped their infant change for the better. They'll have that knowledge for a lifetime."

Field tells about one mom who acknowledged that she chose to come to Brigham and Women's Hospital when she was expecting a second premature birth because she had read about K care. The mother had not been able to hold or touch her first baby and knew that she needed the sense of comfort and giving that K care allows. "You know that technical expertise is not enough when a parent tells you she is still hurting three years after an NICU experience."

Field recalls the words of nurse researcher Martha Curley: "As nurses in family-centered maternity care, we have a responsibility to elevate parents above the status of visitors." In our experience at Brigham and Women's Hospital, K care has done that and so much more. □

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