



# Ukulele Class in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit: Support for Parents Before and During COVID-19

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**H**aving a premature infant in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) can cause significant stress for the family. Fathers of infants sometimes feel as though the medical team focuses on mothers, even though fathers also experience stress, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness (Hollywood & Hollywood, 2011). This feeling of stress occurs not just in the hospital, but once the infant has been discharged as well. Both mothers and fathers typically experience stress both in and after leaving the NICU; however, cortisol levels of fathers do not decrease as quickly as those of mothers (Garfield et al., 2018). As a result, fathers' stress levels remain elevated for a longer period than mothers. Fathers have expressed a desire to network with other fathers to receive social support while their infants are in the NICU (Noergaard et al., 2017).

However, many groups and support services offered for families in the NICU are geared to mothers. Often, these activities include scrapbooking or lactation support groups. Although open to any parent who wants to attend, the majority of participants are female. There are few, if any, groups geared specifically toward men (Fisher et al., 2018).

Although support for all NICU parents is crucial – mothers, fathers, and also parents who identify outside the traditional binary gender roles – this article focuses on support for fathers, a large group whose needs have not been met. Opportunities are needed for peer-to-peer support with

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A ukulele class developed and taught by a music therapist provided peer support to fathers of infants in neonatal intensive care. With the advent of COVID-19, the class not only continued but expanded. Faced with COVID-19 restrictions on family presence, mothers joined the class for safe social connection, and through the use of an online platform, even parents at home were able to participate.

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other fathers who are in similar circumstances. Motivated by this unmet need, the music therapist at University of California San Francisco (UCSF) Benioff Children's Hospital developed a ukulele class for fathers in the intensive care nursery (ICN).

## Development of the Ukulele Class

After reviewing the literature on parent support in the NICU and the lack of support for fathers, the music therapist interviewed fathers to assess their interest in participating in a ukulele class. The benefits of learning an instrument as an approach to support include developing a sense of accomplishment, decreasing stress, and improving social skills in a group setting (Shipman, 2016). The music therapist chose the ukulele because of its small size, ease of learning, and its current popularity. Another advantage was that the music therapy department already had multiple ukuleles available to distribute.

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**Section Editors' Note:** In the past several issues of *Pediatric Nursing*, the *Family Matters* department and a guest editorial by *Family Matters* department editors have focused on COVID-19 and implications for children and families. This article continues that theme by describing a unique, existing, NICU peer support program and how it adapted and actually expanded as a result of COVID-19.

The **Family Matters** series focuses on issues, information, and strategies relevant to working with families of pediatric patients. To suggest topics, obtain author guidelines, or to submit queries or manuscripts, contact Co-Editors Elizabeth Ahmann, ScD, RN, PCC; or Deborah Dokken, MPA, *Pediatric Nursing*; East Holly Avenue/Box 56; Pitman, NJ 08071-0056; (856) 256-2300 or FAX (856) 589-7463.

The aims of the class are to enable fathers to socialize, meet other fathers, and learn a new skill – in this case, how to play the ukulele. The group is held once a week for one hour on the patio outside the unit. Having the class outside allows for a change of scenery and much needed access to fresh air, and provides encouragement to fathers to step away from their baby's bedside for self-care, while still being close enough to quickly return if needed. When fathers join the group, the music therapist provides them with ukuleles, generously donated by Kala Brand Music Company (Petaluma, CA). These ukuleles are theirs to keep, so each father can practice on his own and play for his baby in the ICN and at home after discharge. Playing the ukulele provides the fathers a new coping technique to use in the ICN and another activity to strengthen the bond with their infant. No musical experience is required to attend the class. The music therapist teaches the fathers how to tune the ukulele, play basic chords, and read a chord sheet. Every participant leaves each class knowing how to play at least one new song.

## Lessons from Implementing the Class for Fathers

A key challenge in teaching adults is that some are harder on themselves when learning a new skill in a group setting. This can be due to the different skill level with which each participant begins, comparison to others, the actual challenges of playing the instrument, and/or the frustration of not learning something as fast as one had hoped (Roulston et al., 2015). When these challenges occur, fathers may drop out and stop attending classes. The music therapist addresses this challenge in the ukulele class by focusing each session on learning only two to three chords and a few songs that use those chords so participants can achieve a level of basic mastery early on. This motivates them to continue and learn more songs with only those chords. Everyone feels successful in the class, and most are motivated to go on to learn additional chords and more challenging songs. First-time attendees are also invited to just watch and listen if they are hesitant about playing in front of others.

Involving fathers in selecting the song(s) they would like to learn for the next week is another important strategy. This both allows the fathers to be excited about coming back and to know what to expect when they return. Song selection also ensures group members are learning what *they* are interested in.

Fathers in the ukulele class have requested to learn a variety of songs, including children's, Disney, rock and roll, and specific songs that may be important to their family. In each class, the fathers typically learn three to four songs. Throughout the week, the music therapist checks in on the fathers during ICN rounds to see if they have any questions and to assist with tuning their ukuleles if needed.

Recruiting fathers to attend the class was a learning experience in itself. Ultimately, word of mouth among parents was the fastest and most effective way to increase the number of class participants. New fathers attended if other fathers invited them to attend. Flyers were helpful, but having other fathers talk about the group encouraged increased attendance. These father-to-father conversations often happened in the elevators, hallways, or cafeteria. Potential attendees are reassured the goal of the group is to meet other fathers – with or without the ukulele. They are

assured they are not required to play or sing – they can just enjoy the camaraderie of being with other ICN fathers. It has been very rewarding to see new fathers are always encouraged by experienced fathers, and friendships often develop that extend beyond the class and ICN stay.

## Illustrations of Benefits

One day during the ukulele group, a father received a call that his son was having a code, and he was needed back at the bedside. The father left immediately; no one expected him to return to the group that day. About 15 minutes later, as the group was wrapping up, the father returned and requested to play music with the other members to help him calm down now that his baby was stable. The entire class joined in and played for another 15 minutes with him. The fathers then went to the cafeteria to talk about what had happened and provide support to the father whose baby had coded. This supportive relationship between the fathers had developed solely through the ukulele class.

Another illustration of the impact of the class occurred during an end-of-life situation. While an infant was dying in the ICN, his father played the ukulele and sang to him. Although the class and skills acquired were never anticipated to be used for such a sad situation, they offered a way for this father to say goodbye to his baby.

## A Father's Perspective

A father, Chris (see Figures 1-3), describes the significance of his experience in the ukulele class:

Being an ICN/NICU parent has its share of very long days, and ukulele class was actually something fun to look forward to during our stay. It kind of forced me to take a needed break for myself, even though the whole time I was learning, I knew it was something I was going to go back in and share with my son. It was easy to feel helpless some days while you wait for your child to heal and grow, but I like to think adding a little music helped him progress along. I can't say my ukulele playing is necessarily very good, but as far as my son is concerned – I am the best he's ever heard!

## Adaptation and Expansion During COVID-19

Once COVID-19 became a concern in March 2020, the hospital instituted new restrictions, allowing only one family member at the ICN bedside at a time. The ukulele class was permitted to continue outside, with appropriate social distancing and masks. However, the composition of the attendees changed. In the first week post-onset of COVID-19 restrictions, one father attended, along with five mothers. One mother saw the group from the window and said, "I don't know what you're doing, but I want to do it because I just can't be inside anymore."

Because of the hospital's COVID-19 restrictions, parents no longer had access to the parent lounge and were asked to stay in their own rooms to minimize contact with others. Many hospital-supported activities that mothers had previously enjoyed were cancelled, and fewer fathers were present because mothers' presence was prioritized to support

**Figure 1.**  
Chris plays the ukulele in class outside  
on the hospital patio.



Note: Photograph printed with permission.

**Figure 2.**  
Chris plays songs he learned in class for his  
son in the intensive care nursery.



Note: Photograph printed with permission.

**Figure 3.**  
Chris plays the ukulele with his son at home  
after discharge.



Note: Photograph printed with permission.

breastfeeding. Each parent was confined to their child's room. Parents did not have the support of another family member in the room with them. Both mothers and fathers expressed the need to be around other people in a safe way, and the outdoor ukulele class met that need.

As the COVID-19 restrictions continue, the ukulele class is held twice a week. Once a week, it is held in person, outside, with social distancing and masks. The second time each week, the group meets online through videoconferencing. Parents who are interested in participating are encouraged to email the music therapist before the group so a ukulele can be mailed to them or left for them at their baby's bedside. The online classes have provided a new opportunity for parents at home to attend and to meet other parent participants. Because the class is held during the lunch hour, it also allows class members who are working to take a lunch break and attend.

Music is a powerful way to bring people together and create joy and hope during challenging times. The ukulele class for fathers began as an effort to create an enjoyable activity and a way to encourage peer-to-peer support for fathers in the NICU, whose social and emotional needs have often been neglected. With the advent of COVID-19, it has expanded to include *all* parents, providing stress reduction, social connection, and new coping skills that can be used both during the ICN hospitalization and at home. ■

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