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Socio-demographic factors related to parent engagement in the neonatal intensive care unit

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Objectives: To 1) explore the relationships between sociodemographic factors and parent engagement in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), and 2) determine if participation in a parent-delivered, positive sensory intervention program (SENSE) relates to increased parent engagement.

Background: Preterm birth results in significant health complications, necessitating infant hospitalization in the NICU, which alters early sensory experiences. Early positive sensory experiences in the NICU are further impacted by the challenges parents face engaging in care.

Methods: Sixty-four premature infants born ≤ 32 weeks of gestation were randomized at birth to receive SENSE or standard of care. The SENSE intervention consisted of parent education about how to conduct specific types and doses of positive sensory exposures during hospitalization. Bedside logs were used to record parent presence and engagement across both groups. An engagement was defined as completion of specific doses of sensory exposures defined in the SENSE intervention, while presence was the number of days per week parents was present in the NICU.

Results: Being married ($p=.026$) and having private insurance ($p=0.004$) related to more parent engagement. Participation in the SENSE intervention increased engagement for young mothers ($p=0.001$) and those living farther away from the NICU ($p<0.001$). Participation in the SENSE intervention also increased presence for younger mothers ($p=0.002$) and those living farther away ($p<.001$).

Conclusion: This study identified unmarried mothers and public insurance holders as possible risk groups for low parent engagement in the NICU. The SENSE intervention led to increased parent engagement among younger mothers and those living farther from the hospital.

Biography

Laura Whitehill is a second-year medical student at University College Dublin with research interests in the social determinants of health and health disparities. Her goal as a medical researcher is to improve care for those at the highest risk for health disparities, in particular in the areas of maternal and child health. She received her Bachelor of Science in human science from Georgetown University and a Master of Social Science in sociology from University College Dublin. She was selected as one of 15 students to participate in the Institute for Public Health Summer Research Program at Washington University in St. Louis where she worked with the NICU Occupational Therapy Lab under Dr. Roberta Pineda. The summer program also reinforced her passion for interprofessional collaboration especially in intensive care settings.

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