



**Council of International Neonatal Nurses, Inc. (COINN)**  
**Position Statement on**  
***'Keeping babies and their parents together'***

**POSITION:**

The Council of International Neonatal Nurses, Inc. (COINN) believes that every baby worldwide should have an optimal start in life and that parents are an integral part of this. It is undisputed that involvement of parents is of paramount importance and integrating infant and family-centered developmental care (IFCDC) as a core standard for neonatal care is essential– in particular for the most vulnerable infants such as preterm, sick, and low birthweight babies (European Foundation for the Care of Newborn Infants (EFCNI), 2021; Global Alliance for Newborn Health (GLANCE), 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic led to the implementation of a set of measures which included a restriction of parental presence, frequently leading to separation of parents and their babies. These measures in many areas have continued even though the pandemic is waning. Given the pandemic related challenges in neonatal care, we advocate for healthcare workers to listen to the parents' experiences and to acknowledge their crucial role in the care of hospitalized babies worldwide. In addition, following the invitation by EFCNI and GLANCE to support their 'zero-separation' policy, we strongly support this essential initiative and to keep parents and their babies together.

**BACKGROUND:**

Before the global COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing number of neonatal units worldwide had adopted the principles of infant and family-centered developmental care (IFCDC) including unrestricted parental access, active parental participation and involvement in care including kangaroo mother care (KMC) (Oude Maatman et al, 2020; Petty and van den Hoogen, 2022). Research shows that if the parents feel empowered to care for their baby, maternal stress and

anxiety can be reduced and hospital stays may decrease (Kupahu-Marino Kahoano et al., 2022; Waddington et al., 2021). Separating family members, and, in particular, parents from their babies has severe consequences for the care provision and health outcomes of the vulnerable infant due to limited possibilities for example, with skin-to-skin care, KMC, parent-infant bonding, and breast-feeding.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented public health threat, creating the challenge of preventing virus transmission while simultaneously maintaining best quality care. It disrupted healthcare systems, challenging neonatal care provision globally. Research by EFCNI (2021) and Kostenzer et al (2022a; 2022b), confirmed that related restrictions resulted in severe limitations in neonatal care provision, particularly regarding the vital elements of IFCDC. Significant country-specific differences were also identified in twelve countries highlighting that application of IFCDC was less prone to disruptions in some countries than others. Most importantly, certain countries did not allow either parent to be with their hospitalized baby following implementation of a strict separation policy. Separation of parents and their babies has significant negative implications for the health outcomes of infants interfering with the above-mentioned practices (Litmanovitz et al., 2021).

The reduction of parental presence in the neonatal intensive care units (NICU) has led to increased stress and mental health problems among parents and families, raising the risk of postnatal depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome and limited opportunities for parent–infant bonding (Bembich et al., 2020; Muniraman et al., 2020). Moreover, having to implement these restrictions, along with staff shortages and the lack of available guidelines, has led to elevated levels of stress and anxiety among both health professionals and parents (Boronat et al., 2020; Cena et al., 2021).

Given this important evidence-based background and context, COINN has agreed the following key recommendations (see overleaf):

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

COINN recommends that:

- Every baby, born prematurely, small and / or sick, along with their parents / primary caregivers, should be provided with high-quality care in all settings that includes the holistic application of family inclusion and IFCDC.
- Every woman and/or birthing person should be provided with a safe, respectful environment and supportive care during pregnancy, labor and birth.
- Partners and appropriate support persons should be able to be present during antenatal care, appointments and throughout birth and the perinatal period.
- Parents should be valued as key caregivers of their babies at all times, including and empowering their parenting role.
- Establishing the EFCNI 'zero separation' policy is essential to ensure a family-integrated policy is adopted in hospitals and any other appropriate setting.
- As attachment and bonding can only take place if the parents are consistently present, they must be given the opportunity to care for their baby. Early and ongoing parental presence therefore must be encouraged, to ensure skin-to-skin care/ KMC, and family-infant bonding.
- Breast milk expression and / or initiation and continuation of breastfeeding should be encouraged, when possible, for optimum nutrition for babies. This emphasizes further the need to prevent separation that would avert or inhibit these essential feeding practices.
- Adequate provision of health information and continuous respectful communication between healthcare professionals and parents, is paramount.
- Access to mental health support services should be offered and provided to parents and families who require them.
- Parents should be considered as essential care providers and not visitors; policies should reflect this status/wording.
- Parents should be provided personal protective equipment (PPE) as essential care providers.
- Every baby should have access to their parents/care givers regardless of COVID-19 status.
- Parents should be provided access to safe areas to eat and drink.
- Ensure tailored education on the principles of IFCDC, supporting a fundamental change in the mentality of neonatal staff and caregivers in the provision of neonatal care.
- Overall, there is an urgent need to re-evaluate any existing separation policies, to strengthen the IFCDC model worldwide and to strive to ensure that the 2030 Development Agenda is achieved.

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