INTRODUCTION
- Parenting and family life were exceptionally susceptible to unanticipated changes during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Pandemic-related practice changes may lead to elevated levels of stress and uncertainty especially for families experiencing an infant’s admission to a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, parental presence was encouraged through unrestricted visitation and family-centered care practices in the NICU.
- Parental caregiving is essential to an infant’s healthy development, especially during hospitalization.

PURPOSE
To describe parent perceptions about a neonatal hospitalization during the COVID-19 pandemic and use findings to develop a consensus statement on essential care.

METHODS & ANALYSIS
- US-Based, online, anonymous survey
- Social media recruitment through Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram
- Data collected from May – July 2020
- Inclusion criteria:
  - Infant admitted to a NICU on or after February 1, 2020.
  - Consent to participate in survey
- Free text responses to 4 open-ended questions qualitatively analyzed using NVIVO 11 software.

THEMES
1. Emotional isolation and exhaustion.
2. Parents desire to be valued as “essential” because parent presence is vital for infant health.
3. NICU providers exacerbated or alleviated distress.

CONCLUSIONS
- Hospital policies viewed as ‘non-sensical’ and not in touch with the needs of families.
- Parents described the emotional struggle of being separated from support systems, feelings of isolation, lack of family-centered care, and exacerbation of emotional distress already known to be common to the NICU journey.
- To support families and advocate for unlimited parent presence, 3 professional organizations responded to the findings by creating a consensus statement on ESSENTIAL CARE IN THE NICU.

ESSENTIAL CARE
(Quotes from Parents)

This whole experience has been the worst of my life and if my husband lives with me, and I’m allowed in the NICU, then he should be too. He should be considered an essential caregiver and not a visitor.

The hospital as an institution put in place policies meant for the greater good, and yet seemingly not considering something that nurses, and doctors have long practiced and preached: that family support of a baby in the neonatal intensive care unit is, in fact, essential.

Parents are not and should NOT be considered visitors. We are essential for the baby’s health and all of us need to be together as a family. We also need to be present to advocate for our baby. We live together, eat together, my husband was dropping me and picking me up from the hospital. So, we are exposed to each other, how does this reduce the risk?

“Hospital policies [were] not in touch with the reality of families, making the impossible pain of [having] a baby in the NICU even more impossible.”
(Parent Quote)