

## Here's looking at you, kid: how webcams help parents bond with premature babies

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## **Here's looking at you, kid: how webcams help parents bond with premature babies**

During pregnancy, most parents prepare for the baby's arrival and look forward to introducing a healthy baby to family and friends soon after the birth. But an increasing number of parents (8-12%) find that things do not progress as planned and their hoped-for healthy baby is sick or premature and needs expert neonatal care.

When this happens, joy is replaced by concern about the baby's immediate and longer-term health and development, and a period of stress and anxiety for the parents often follows. Admission to a neonatal unit also means the parents are separated from their baby for lengthy periods just when they should be establishing bonds.



Admission to a neonatal unit separates parents from their baby just when they should be establishing close bonds. Shutterstock

While the survival and long-term future of babies is improved in a neonatal unit, the separation of parents and children limits opportunities for early bonding. Parents are encouraged to visit the neonatal unit as much as possible; however, there is a need to develop and evaluate interventions to help parents feel closer to their babies when they are physically separated from them. Webcam technology presents a potential solution.

Published recently in [BMC Pediatrics](#), our [study](#) is one of a few world-wide to have evaluated the use of webcam technology in neonatal units. This UK-based study represents the first in-depth analysis of parent and professional views on whether webcams can assist the early bonding process.

We interviewed 30 mothers and fathers and 18 professionals, including nurses, midwives, nursery nurses and doctors, in a Scottish hospital over a six-month period.

### **The comfort of technology**

Each webcam was placed over an individual cot/incubator in the neonatal unit and transmitted real-time images of the baby, wirelessly and securely, to a linked tablet computer kept by recovering mothers in the postnatal area in the hospital. The camera was switched off when medical/nursing procedures were undertaken to avoid any potential distress on the part of parents, but otherwise it was in constant operation, allowing parents to see their baby whenever they wished.

Parent and professional views of the webcam technology were overwhelmingly positive. One of the issues discussed by a number of the parents was that the technology allowed them to “feel that they were with their baby” even during periods of separation. It also meant they were able to be more responsive to their babies’ needs – for example, seeing their baby, helped mothers to produce breast milk. One mother of an eight-week premature baby said:

*When I had my little boy [also admitted to a neonatal unit] I couldn't see him straightaway, whereas this time having the camera means I can see her constantly, she's right beside my bed, really. Also, with things like expressing milk, I've found that a lot easier.*

Parents also discussed how webcam technology had helped them to “keep more stable emotionally” in the days following the delivery. The mother of a six-week premature baby described the comfort the webcam brought her:

*If I didn't have the camera, I think I would have cracked up. I'd been waking up during the night and being able to see that she was there and that she was sleeping meant I was able to fall back to asleep again.*

Use of the technology also helped the mothers to “recover physically” following the birth, with issues such as rest, nourishment and the reduction of pain being discussed. One mother stated she would “definitely have got less sleep if I hadn't been able to see her on the tablet”.

Parents also discussed the benefits that the webcam technology afforded in allowing them to share “real-time” pictures of the baby with their wider family and friends. The mother of a five-week premature baby told us:

*My partner loves it, just being able to see her all the time. And my mum and dad thought it was a fantastic idea. Because our baby's in neonatal they couldn't visit her, so it meant they didn't have to wait to see her.*

Finally, staff in the neonatal care unit stressed the almost “gift-like” quality of webcam technology. A neonatal nurse said:

*You get such a great reaction the minute the baby's stable. If I took a tablet round, the mum was just so happy. She thought she wasn't going to see her baby for maybe another 12 hours, and then I appear and say, “Here she is, now you can watch her.”*



Neonatal professionals have described the comfort webcams bring parents separated from their newborn babies. BUH NICU, CC BY-SA

## **Parental anxieties**

But for a small minority of parents in our study, the ability to see their baby 24/7 appeared to increase rather than decrease their anxiety. Areas of concern included interpreting what was being seen on the screen of the tablet and wondering if it was something to be concerned about. The father of a six-week premature baby said:

*It's a double-edged sword using the webcam, I would say. You can see what's happening but you don't always know what's happening.*

Another mother of a ten-week premature baby said she got deeply anxious if the camera was not switched on:

*Sometimes they turned the camera off and they'd forget to turn it on again and I had a sense of anxiousness when I couldn't see him. I didn't want to make a fuss and be a neurotic mother but I would ask, "Please can you turn it on so I can see he's okay?"*



Being able to see their baby at any time gives most parents peace of mind, but for some it made them more anxious. Shutterstock

With a current global increase in premature births, webcam technology can offer an important solution to periods of enforced parent-child separation in the early postnatal period. For the majority of parents these benefits meant increased feelings of closeness; enhanced emotional well-being; assisted the mother's physical recovery, and facilitated the involvement of family and friends.

These benefits appeared to encourage the early bonding process between parents and their babies. Further work is required to assess the cost-effectiveness of webcam technology and also to evaluate its use in the family home following the mother's discharge from hospital; currently it is only available in the hospital.

While mothers are commonly discharged after a few days, their premature baby may remain in neonatal care for weeks or even months. Webcam access at home could mean the difference between stressful anxiety and peace of mind for new parents.