

# Expressive Laboratory for parents in Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The admittance of a baby in NICU is a shocking and stressful experience for parents that need support to comprehend and accept circumstances and help to start the relation with their baby. Expressive Laboratory (EL) is a counseling activity that offers parents the possibility to explore their emotional experience by participating with other parents in meetings with a counselor and a psychologist.

**Materials and method:** The EL includes a set of nine meetings, planned in three moments: pre-contact, contact and post-contact, each meeting is focusing on a particular theme and at the end parents fill out an anonymous feedback form where they can show their appreciation of the activities performed, the benefit obtained and the emotions experienced.

**Results:** From May 2009 to September 2010 seven sets of meetings were organized in which 142 parents participated and they filled out 286 feedback forms. The main results from this descriptive study concerned feelings as: sharing the experience, ability to express oneself, finding resources. Some comments go beyond the activities of EL.

**Conclusions:** The major benefits of EL reported by the parents are the sharing of the experience; not to feel lonely during the hospital stay. The experience to share allows a full understanding of the stories, promoting the creation of a support net that lasts even after the discharge of the baby with self-aid groups.

## Keywords

Expressive Laboratory, counseling, parents, Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

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## Introduction

Attitudes towards parents of newborns admitted in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) have gradually changed. Parent's fear and stress were

almost ignored in the past and they were scarcely *tolerated* by the staff while today they are often seen as a *resource* [1]. The admittance of a baby in NICU is a shocking and stressful experience and parents need help to cope with their feelings, which sometimes are with a sense of guilt and inadequacy and their destiny is seen as unfair [2]. Therefore parents need support to comprehend and accept circumstances and help to start the relation with their baby [3].

Expressive Laboratory (EL) is a counseling activity, inspired by the psychiatrist Moreno's art-therapy, that tries to give answers to patients' needs to keep their emotions under control and to stimulate and increase their levels of consciousness and their possibility to express emotions of grief [4].

In art-counseling patients use their own creativity to represent what they are living to create a feeling of freedom and well-being. During the EL activity the body communicates, the hands create and the mind is quiet. Only later the mind is able to recognize and become aware of the meaning of what was created.

In EL the counselor avoids any judgment, her/his role is that of a facilitator who proposes activities and guide the parent's emotional exploration, always trying to ensure the pleasure of being and doing [5].

EL started to help parents to comprehend negative feelings and to put them aside, hoping they will not re-emerge in a destabilizing way [6].

EL offers parents the possibility to explore their relationship with themselves, their baby, the nursing staff and the social environment [7]. In the present study the parents were expected to give answers to their feelings concerning: appreciation of the EL-meetings, personal feelings during EL-meetings and above all exploring their emotions.

In May 2009 the EL opened at the NICU, St. John Calibita Hospital, Rome, for parents of babies admitted to the unit in collaboration with the Unit of Psychology.

The aim of this study is to analyze parents exploring their emotional experience by participating with other parents in meetings with a counselor and a psychologist who guide them through the activities proposed by the EL.

## Materials and method

The EL includes a set of nine meetings, planned in three moments during 1.5 hrs:

- Pre-contact (5'): the counselor welcomes the participants, presents the activities, shows the topic; the group becomes familiar with the materials.
- Contact (1 hr): every participant starts the activity alone, trying to communicate with the child that is inside her/himself, letting the desire of lightness and *game come through* (memories from one's own childhood); the counselor encourages the concentration and the self-exploration, in the background music is played.
- Post-contact (20'): the counselor guides the sharing of the experience in the group and closing the session suggests parents to comment: "what do you leave and what did you get from this experience" or if you feel like it please suggest "a word to finish this experience".

In every meeting at least 5 parents participate. The Head physician and the Head nurse give the first information of EL during the welcome interview to parents. They receive further information by the counselor during her/his weekly meetings with them.

Parents have free choice to participate to one or to all meetings.

Each of the nine meetings is focusing on a particular theme, using the participants' fantasy, activated by the counselor and utilizing different materials (papers, photos, colors, clay).

Themes:

1. A collage/image of professionals
2. A collage/image of the baby
3. A structure/building of main emotions
4. A clay composing/handling
5. A tale or a comic strip
6. A live statue arranged between parents
7. Guided fantasy
8. Eco map
9. Feelings in motion

At the end of every meeting the parents fill out an anonymous feedback form (**Table 1**) where they can show their appreciation of the activities performed, the benefit obtained and the emotions experienced during the meeting.

## Results

From May 2009 to September 2010 seven sets of meetings were organized in which 142 parents

**Table 1.** Feedback form.

<b>Expressive Laboratory form</b>	
<b>Meeting:</b> Collage of Professionals Collage Baby Structure Clay Tale Guided Fantasy Live Statue Ecomap Feelings In Motion	
<b>1. At the end of the meeting I feel (Appreciation)</b>	A Little Enough Much A Lot
<b>2. During this meeting I could (Benefits)</b>	Share my experience Feel hear Distract myself Find inner resources Find external resources Other .....
<b>3. What I get</b>	
<b>4. What I leave</b>	
<b>5. Through the play I could express myself (Emotions)</b>	Anger Fear Pain Joy Hope Dullness Other .....
<b>6. What I am going to do as a parent (Projection to the future)</b>	
<b>Suggestions and proposals</b>	
<b>Date:</b> .....	

participated (116 mothers and 26 fathers) and they filled out 286 feedback forms. The present is a descriptive study.

The participants' answers are shown in **Table 2**. Appreciation had a high rating (87%) presuming the activities proposed turned out well, were accepted and useful. Thirty percentages of the parents reported *sharing the experience* as benefit, 28% *the ability to express oneself* and 25% *finding resources*. Being able to leave some frustrating feelings behind, is a

result of an inside process where the counselor have been a role model. In fact 40% of the parents say they have left the sense of guilt, and 37% the loneliness. Parents report they received something during the meeting, 30% welcoming, 30% say new learning in facing the trauma, 24% self-acknowledgement. During the EL some conflicting feelings, such as fear and hope, anger and joy can emerge, the positive ones (hope and joy 58%) are more frequent than anger, pain and fear (42%). Some results go beyond

**Table 2.** Results of the variables contained in the feedback form.

<b>Appreciation</b>				
High 87%	Medium 13%	Low 0%		
<b>Benefits</b>				
Sharing 30%	Being able to express oneself 28%	Finding resources 25%	Distracting oneself 16%	
<b>What I leave</b>				
Sense of guilt 40%	Loneliness 37%	Silence 18%	Pain 5%	
<b>What I get</b>				
Welcoming 30%	New learning 30%	Self-acknowledgement 24%	Optimism 16%	
<b>Emotions</b>				
Hope 30%	Joy 28%	Fear 21%	Pain 16%	Anger 5%
<b>Projection to the future</b>				
Taking care of one's own emotions 30%	Integrating one's own qualities and limits 20%	Learning how to play with the baby 30%	Learning how to communicate with the baby 20%	

the simple activity of EL. From one side the parents are conscious to have to reprocess the trauma they are living and to take care of their emotions (30%), when they feel the will to do it. On the other hand they are satisfied to learn how to interact with their baby (50%) using the knowledge they've gained.

## Conclusions

The idea behind the EL is to support parents during the dramatic experience of having a newborn in a NICU. The EL activities help parents to restore their well-being and emotional balance [8]. EL uses art expressions and game activities as a go-between the emotions, giving them a shape, which help parents to understand them and relate to them in a deeper way. It also helps them to see and accept their emotions without being overwhelmed [9]. Playing makes parents think about their baby in a joyful way diminishing their emotional distress and negative thoughts. Games also give parents the possibility to relate in a non-verbal way to their child through giving attention to their relationship and the pleasure of being together with other parents.

The major benefits reported by the parents are in fact the sharing of the experience; they don't feel lonely during the hospital stay of their baby. EL is dedicated to parents that for an hour and half can express her/himself as a person, talk, being heard and understood. Some thoughts/feelings by parents during the narrative time in EL: "we felt lost, so much fearful and anxious", "it wasn't an easy birth and what we had to expect was totally unknown", "we are premature parents... just like our premature baby", "taking out the stormy sea from my heart and giving it a shape and limit, I can watch it, reduce it, talk about it, share it, contrasting the fear and the risk to break down and thus not being able to be a

good parent". The experience to share allows a full understanding of the stories, promoting the creation of a support net that lasts even after the discharge of the baby with self-aid groups.

Further observations are necessary, especially the follow up of parents who have taken part in the EL to confirm the achieved results and to understand the effects of EL activities.

## Declaration of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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