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Brookline Company Helps Parents Stay Close to Premies

BROOKLINE -- Having a baby is never easy, but having a premature baby comes with a whole slew of complications for both the baby and the parents.

Neighbors Patty Nagle and Shannon Dwyer know the struggle of having premature babies first-hand, and through their new business, Early Bird Baby, they're reaching out to other parents to share a little of what they've learned.

Six years ago, Nagle, who works in publishing, gave birth to premature twin boys and endured the emotional roller coaster that comes with having to leave the hospital but not being able to bring your babies home with you.

Dwyer faced the same stresses with the birth of her first son at just 29 weeks gestation. The little boy weighed only 2.5 pounds and faced an extended stay at the hospital. Though she was told that the premature birth of her baby was just a fluke, her next child also decided to come early and was born at just 30 weeks.

When Dwyer and Nagle, who live next door to each other in Brookline, finally met, Dwyer's second preemie was still in the hospital in Boston and she was making daily treks to see him.

"I asked her what his five-day count was," said Nagle. "Shannon immediately knew I understood what she was going through." A preemie must be able to consistently show an acceptable range of vital signs for a full five days before he or she can be sent home, thus the five-day count is one of the terms learned quickly by parents of premies.

"We were more than neighbors," Nagle said. "We were mothers who understood what it was like to have children in NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit)." For many parents of premature babies, having others to talk to who have been through the same ordeal is priceless, but often lacking. Knowing that others out there were suffering just as they had, Nagle and Dwyer decided to create a kit called the Early Bird Baby Box that is designed to help premies and their parents stay close in those early weeks and months.

The kit includes a Baby Lovie, a blanket that captures a mother's scent and can be left with the baby when she's away, a teddy bear, a mirror, a long-sleeved shirt and mitts that will actually fit the tiny bodies of premature babies, a journal, a disposable camera, and a talking picture frame.

Comfort boxes

Though the gift boxes were originally designed for parents of premies, Nagle and

Dwyer have also begun creating boxes for parents of babies who have to be separated from their children for their own health reasons, or because they have to go back to work or are being deployed overseas.

These so-called "comfort boxes" contain a few vital items that can give parents a little sense of home when they're far away, and leave the babies something to remember them by.

Dwyer, whose husband served in Iraq and came home just in time to find out that she had been diagnosed with colon cancer, said she has been given a keen understanding of how important having a physical connection with her children during times of separation really was.

"I've had a lot of time to think about it," said Dwyer, who has undergone chemotherapy, radiation, and extensive surgeries to treat the cancer, which is now in remission.

And Nagle said that she understands how difficult it is for moms to return to work, leaving their babies at home, and many of Early Bird Baby's corporate customers are beginning to understand as well.

"We've got corporations and businesses that now buy our comfort boxes as gifts for parents who are returning to work after having a baby," Nagle said. "It's a gift that really shows that you understand how a new parent is feeling, and that you care." The Early Bird Baby Boxes are priced at \$75 and up, and a portion of each purchase goes to the March of Dimes NICU Family Support Project and/or the Early Baby Fund which helps provide the comfort kits to needy families.

For more information, visit www.earlybirdbaby.com or call 603-673-3498.

Packaging with purpose

To the untrained eye, the items that are included in the Early Bird Baby Boxes may seem like a random assortment of gifts, but to parents of premature babies, the gifts have a specific purpose, according to Shannon Dwyer and Patty Nagle, the company's founders.

*Baby Lovie Security Blanket: A soft square of cloth edged in satin absorbs the mother's scent and she can feel like she's leaving her essence with her baby when her hospital visit is over.

*Ultimate Receiving Blanket: This large receiving blanket actually comes with instructions on how to swaddle a baby stitched into the hem. Babies that are firmly wrapped in a blanket sleep better, Nagle said.

*Baby Creamie Bear: Though at first glance it's just a teddy bear, the plush, soft animal can be used by nurses to support the tiny babies. "Preemies have to be turned regularly from their backs to their sides," Dwyer said, "and the bear is used to prop them up."

*Journal: The first few days, and in some cases, weeks, that parents spend going back and forth to the hospital to see their babies can be exhausting and chaotic. By keeping journal, parents will have a chance to reflect on their experiences and share them with their children later on.

*Outfit: It's tough to find clothes that will fit a two-pound preemie, but this cotton sleeper comes close. By bringing it home and washing it, mom also gets a chance to do something for her baby when she's away.

*Camera: Some parents are so busy that they forget to take pictures of their preemies, while others don't feel comfortable taking snapshots of their babies with tubes and wires coming out of them. But down the road, after the crisis of the first few weeks is over, Dwyer said it is nice to be able to look back and remember how far they've come. The disposable camera can be left with the nurses so that they can take photos when mom and dad aren't there.

*Talking Picture Frame: A picture of mom and dad and a sweet message for baby can help parents feel like a part of them is with their child.

*Mirror: Moms of preemies often spend their visits at the hospital with their babies laying face down on their mother's chest as the babies are fed through tubes, but this position makes it difficult for a mom to see her baby's face.

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