

## Dear Premie Parents and Guardians,

Congratulations on your tiny, mighty, little person(s) who burst forth into this world and flooded your heart with a disproportionately enormous amount of love.

I know your head is probably spinning. I remember the fear and overwhelming feelings that coursed through me, and the physical toll on my body from the emergency c-section that brought my barely 28-weeker into the world. Not into my arms, but into a Giraffe.

I can still recall and how stunned I felt when the nurses and the other parents congratulated me. I couldn't believe that this baby, for whom I had waited, wished, prayed, and worked, was so suddenly present, and so frighteningly vulnerable. I remember feeling like those congratulations, while well-meaning, maybe weren't yet appropriate.

After all, I hadn't managed to carry my sweet boy to term, I couldn't hold him, comfort him, or feed him. I was terrified of the challenges that lay ahead for him and, while I didn't voice it, afraid he might be too small, too new, too vulnerable to survive them. But he was here. He was amazing. And he, we, deserved every bit of celebration. And so do you.

The journey ahead will bring challenges you never anticipated, and I suspect (and hope) joy you can't foresee. As you navigate through your journey as a premie Mama, Daddy, or Caregiver, know that while your story is fully your own, you are not alone. Even if we never meet, there are parents here who know your hope and fear. Those who have waited with bated breath to be buzzed into the NICU, hoping they're not too late for the next feed, who have cried because they can't hold the baby this time, or because there is a setback they never anticipated.

We've spent hours on FaceTime reassuring our families when we didn't feel so sure ourselves and we have gone through that phase of desperation where it feels like there must be something, anything, you can do to bring your sweet baby home sooner.

As you make your way forward, there are two phrases that brought me comfort when things were really trying and reminded me that my sweet babe would not live in the NICU forever:

1. The hours are long, but the days are short.
2. Each day that passes brings me closer to bringing my baby home.

From being admitted for pre-term labor until my little lovey's discharge day, I spent exactly eleven weeks living at St. Peter's Hospital. I will forever be grateful that I was able to stay just down the hall from my little one, but that time was exceptionally difficult in so many ways. We were in the thick of COVID-19, so there were restrictions on my being anywhere other than my room or the NICU. As the time passed, I found little ways to make the days just a bit easier, to achieve a silver lining of self-care. Whether you live at the hospital or travel from home, I am hoping that sharing my experience might help you find space for a little bit more ease, too.

Take care of yourself however you can. Eat and hydrate. Put snacks in your pockets if you have to. This is especially important if you're pumping for your baby. Try and get at least three hours of sleep in one chunk and more if you can later, especially if you're pumping! As soon as you feel physically able, take a quick shower, and get dressed every day (clean sweats count!).

Make little rituals for the times you're with baby and when you're not. I would always go back to my room after his afternoon feeding and have coffee, Lorna Doones and then pump. My husband

would listen to a funny podcast during his commute to/from the hospital. We each had our own special song we'd sing to our son (we are not singers by any means). Don't be afraid to take a break every once in a while. Ask for help, talk to your people, allow yourself to be encouraged.

We had so many people ask what we needed, and I had no idea how to answer. As time went by, these are the things we were delighted to have:

#### **For My Little One:**

- Baby blankets (to decorate the isolette and eventually to swaddle baby – 30"x30" blankets were perfect swaddles when he was still tiny).
- Books or e-books – anything you'll enjoy reading aloud. I depended on my e-reader apps because I could hold it with one hand and read during skin to skin.
- Premie or ultra-preemie nipples for whatever bottles you want to use at home.
- Premie clothes - My little one wasn't in clothes until 32+ weeks but it was lovely to have a few things for photos. Look for clothes that are easy to get on/off & maneuver wires through. Side snaps and zips that go top to bottom were ideal.
- Milestone cards.
- Nursing pillow.

#### **For Myself:**

- Wrap or button-front tops.
- Comfy slip-on shoes.

- Hands free pumping bra to leave in the pod (made from hospital bell band).
- Unscented hand lotion.
- Layers (the NICU is warm by my room was always cold).
- 1-Handed water bottle.
- Meal delivery (GrubHub, DoorDash) gift cards.
- Tablet or E-reader. Many public libraries have an app for e-books.

#### **For My Courtesy Stay:**

- Towel from home.
- Pillow & blanket from home.
- Media – a tablet or laptop to stream content or a Firestick/Apple TV/Roku etc to plug into the TV.
- Collage frame with family photos.
- Humidifier.
- An insulated mug (I'd pour my coffee in as soon as possible so it would be hot after my first visit with the baby).
- All the snacks!

If you would like to be in touch with other parents in the area who have been through this journey, we've made a Facebook group to connect and support one another: [Facebook.com/groups/littlefighters518](https://www.facebook.com/groups/littlefighters518). Even if our paths never cross, please know that I am sending you love, strength and patience.

Sincerely,

Sara Sheridan Preston, Arlo's Mama



Arlo as a newborn, and at five months.