

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**2 July 2010**

### **PREMS THRIVE ON EXTRA CARE, HOME DELIVERED**

Providing home-based intervention for very premature babies and their families can significantly improve child behaviour and reduce parental stress, according to new Australian research.

The study, by the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and the Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne, found very premature babies who underwent a preventative care program during their first year displayed better social and emotional development at the age of two than prem babies who received standard medical care. They tended to have fewer sleeping, eating and sensory issues, displayed less aggression and were more attentive and compliant. Their caregivers, mainly mothers, were less likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression when compared with parents who did not receive the program.

The program was offered to families of babies born more than 10 weeks premature, and involved nine home visits over the first year of life from physiotherapists and psychologists who focussed on fostering parent-infant bonding, developmental issues and parents' mental health.

Lead researchers Dr Peter Anderson and Professor Lex Doyle said the study, published today in *Pediatrics*, was the most comprehensive of its kind in Australia and provided further evidence that early intervention for premature babies and their families could result in significant benefits for the baby and mother in the short-term.

"Once they get home from hospital, families of premature babies need to deal with many issues, some of which may have long-term consequences to the child's development. Unfortunately, resources for these families are lacking, and many feel unsupported," said Dr Anderson of the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

"This program aimed to help the families deal with those challenges, and our study showed that this can reduce mental health issues in the mother and improve the baby's emotional and social development."

Professor Doyle of the Royal Women's Hospital said children born very premature\* had higher rates of long-term problems with their development and behaviour than children who were born on time. "As more of these tiny and very premature babies are surviving, we need more strategies to combat these problems. Giving families skills to use in the home is one strategy that looks very promising," he said.

Researchers are using the study to develop an online program for parents to access from home. "If successful, this new online program could reach far more families and be cheaper than visits to the home by health professionals," Professor Doyle said. The study, which involved 120 babies, will follow up their progress at age four.

\*About 24,000 babies are born premature in Australia each year, accounting for eight per cent of births. Of these, approximately 3000 are born at less than 30 weeks gestation and classified as very premature.

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