

The Rescuing Hug

What power is unleashed by a hug? Well, one family in Massachusetts believes it to be life-saving. As reported by the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette* back in 1995, Heidi and Paul Jackson's twin girls, Brielle and Kyrie, were born on October 17 of that year, 12 weeks ahead of their due date. Standard hospital practice is to place preemie twins in separate incubators to reduce the risk of infection. That was done for the Jackson girls in the neonatal intensive care unit at UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester.

Kyrie, the larger sister at 2 pounds and 3 ounces, quickly began gaining weight and calmly sleeping her newborn days away. But Brielle, who weighed only 2 pounds at birth, could not keep up with her. She had breathing and heart-rate problems. The oxygen level in her blood was low, and her weight gain was slow. Suddenly, on November 12, Brielle went into critical condition. She began gasping for breath, and her face and stick-thin arms and legs turned bluish gray. Her heart rate was way up, and she got hiccups, a dangerous sign that her body was under stress. Her parents watched, terrified that she might die.

Nurse Gayle Kasparian tried everything she could think of to stabilize Brielle. She suctioned her breathing passages and turned up the oxygen flow to the incubator. Still Brielle squirmed and fussed as her oxygen intake plummeted and her heart rate soared. Then Kasparian remembered something she had heard from a colleague. It was a procedure, common in parts of Europe but almost unheard of in this country, that called for double-bedding multiple-birth babies, especially preemies. Kasparian's nurse manager, Susan Fitzback, was away at a conference, and the arrangement was unorthodox. But Kasparian decided to take the risk.

"Let me just try putting Brielle in with her sister to see if that helps," she said to the alarmed parents. "I don't know what else to do."

The Jacksons quickly gave the go-ahead, and Kasparian slipped the squirming baby into the incubator holding the sister she hadn't seen since birth. Then Kasparian and the Jacksons watched. No sooner had the door of the incubator closed than Brielle snuggled up to Kyrie – and calmed right down. Within minutes, Brielle's blood-oxygen readings were the best they had been since she was born. As she dozed, Kyrie wrapped her tiny arm around her smaller sibling in a tender hug.

By coincidence, the conference Fitzback was attending included a presentation on double-bedding. "This is something I want to see happen at the Medical Center," she thought. But it might be hard making the change. Upon her return,

(more)

she was doing rounds when the nurse caring for the twins that morning said, "Sue, take a look at that isolette over there."

"I can't believe this," Fitzback said. "This is so beautiful."

"You mean we can do it?" asked the nurse. "Of course we can," Fitzback replied.

Heidi and Paul Jackson didn't need any scientific studies to know that double-bedding and a hug helped Brielle.

Nurse Kasparian told me a few days ago that, at last contact, the twin girls, now about 11 years old, were doing fine and still close.

Not only is a hug important to newborn infants, but people of all ages – and especially our residents in Life Care, American Lifestyles and Life Care at Home – benefit from them. Go hug a few today.

--Beecher Hunter