

A partnership between:



life's little treasures
foundation

Supporting Families of Premature & Sick Babies



ACU
AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY



Supporting every step

Impact of the Life's Little Treasures
Foundation in supporting families of premature
and sick babies across Australia

What families need

The Life's Little Treasures Foundation (LLTF) is a leading Australian charity committed to supporting families of premature or sick babies. LLTF provides practical resources and emotional support through approximately 150 Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) and Special Care Units (SCUs) across Australia. These services are available both during hospital stays and after a family's transition home.

Founded by parents with the lived experience of having a premature or sick baby, LLTF's programs are uniquely informed by a firsthand understanding of the emotional and practical challenges that families face. A core element of LLTF's approach is fostering connection between families and others who have shared similar experiences.



Welcoming your baby into the world earlier than anticipated — or facing unexpected health challenges — can turn life upside down. Many parents describe their time in the NICU or SCU as one of the most stressful, emotional experiences they've ever faced, with those feelings continuing after going home.

LLTF and Australian Catholic University (ACU) partnered together to speak directly to families



about what was needed, and to understand how the four main services provided by LLTF help in this especially challenging time. They looked closely at: the guidebooks provided to families in hospital, NICU Connections peer support groups, *Precious Prem Packs*¹ including practical items for premature babies, and the *Little Bag of Calm* to assist with encouraging self-care.

We captured the voices of families through a large national survey and focus groups, where personal stories were shared. We also reviewed existing research about the emotional impacts of having a premature or sick baby, discovering common struggles like anxiety, depression, and the challenges of bonding during a stressful hospital stay.

By listening directly to parents, the project hoped to understand whether these supports truly meet families where they are — offering comfort, clarity, and connection at a time when everything can feel overwhelming.

Our research has shown that certain kinds of support can make this journey a little lighter and help families feel more confident and connected.

FACTORS THAT SUPPORT WELLBEING FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES OF PREMATURE AND SICK BABIES

One of the most helpful things is being involved in your baby's care as early and as often as possible — simple moments like holding your baby skin-to-skin, feeding, or helping with changes can build your confidence and strengthen your bond. This kind of involvement has been shown to support both your emotional well-being and your baby's development. Strong communication with the healthcare team, feeling welcomed at your baby's bedside, and having clear, compassionate information also make a meaningful difference.

But being present isn't always easy. Distance from the hospital, transport costs, caring for other children, and emotional exhaustion can all make it harder to spend the time you want with your baby. That's why supportive programs matter so much.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

Many parents said it meant a great deal to know LLTF's support was created by mums and dads who had lived this journey themselves. That understanding made the resources feel more genuine, comforting and trustworthy during an incredibly vulnerable time.

"I think it's just nice to know that people have walked this path before. And having them, you know, I was kind of aware that all the volunteers had had some kind of experience in this space. And it's, I think you can see that in what they pick and what they choose for you."

Many parents said it meant more to know LLTF's support came from people who had lived this journey themselves. It made the care feel personal, genuine and understanding.

¹ Since this project began, Precious Prem Packs have been renamed Little Treasures Welcome Packs.

What families told us

Parents shared that LLTF's support genuinely helped their emotional well-being — from calming tools like affirmation cards to creative outlets and peer connection. These thoughtful touches made many parents feel seen, supported and less alone during an incredibly overwhelming time.

Parents shared that LLTF's support helped them feel more grounded and connected during the stress of neonatal care. Through their stories, it became clear that LLTF's resources often encouraged bonding, eased anxiety and supported parents to be more involved in their baby's care — all things known to strengthen emotional well-being during this challenging time.

THE GUIDEBOOKS FOR FAMILIES

After two decades of supporting families with premature or sick babies LLTF produced two important guidebooks: *A Guiding Hand for Families in Special Care Nurseries* and *A Guiding Hand for Families in NICU and Special Care Nurseries*. Many parents said the Guidebook helped them feel informed, supported and more connected during a tricky time. These experiences show how important it is for families to receive the right information, in the right moment, for their unique needs.

"It provided me with a lot of information, and it just made me more focused... and provided me with some strategies to move forward. Because I kind of felt

helpless and I kind of felt like I wasn't providing for my daughter and I was bit of a failure of a mum."

The Guidebooks supported parents' engagement across the broader range of products and services explored in the research.

PRECIOUS PREM PACK (LITTLE TREASURES WELCOME PACK)

Participants discussed which products were most useful in the Precious Prem Pack. The Britax car insert was noted to be very practical:

"There was an insert for the car seat that kind of supported her head, and that's something we used for the longest time. I think until she was nearly six months old. Every time we used that, we were kind of reminded of the kindness that we received at the hospital from the organisation."





The journal was also found to be helpful by those who received them:

“Getting the journal was huge. [It] made a huge impact because I was a little bit, I guess, of a robot and [I] became factual and just, like, tried to become very logical and more of a problem solver.”

The knitted blanket and clothing were deeply appreciated by many participants:

“It’s nice to, you know, there is something there that it’s, like, a little gift, like with the blanket. There was a little note in there that, you know, it’s just kind of a heartfelt message. At that time, it was really tough and it’s a bit of a whirlwind, and there’s pain from the caesarean and my partner

had to go back to work, so anything that’s just kind of a support from the community is really lovely.”

One item that deeply resonated with many participants was the fabric hearts, which they could leave with their baby when they had to be apart:

“Walking away from the hospital and leaving a little heart that you had tucked in your bra all day was just like leaving a little piece of myself there with them.”

Parents shared that certain items in the Precious Prem Pack—like the car seat insert, soft blanket, tiny clothes and fabric hearts—brought comfort, practicality and a sense of closeness during a difficult time. Feedback showed how meaningful these small practical gestures can be when they truly match a family’s needs and situation.

LITTLE BAG OF CALM (PARENT SUPPORT PACK)

The Little Bag of Calm was warmly received by recipients, who noted that the affirmation cards had a positive impact on their mental health:

“You know, I thought I was doing what I could, you know. I was working. I was seeing a psychologist. I thought I was doing what I could, but then, just like I said, the simple affirmations that I would ordinarily just find trite or cliched actually really resonated with me at that time.”

BREAKFAST BAR

Many parents said the Breakfast Bar was a small but deeply appreciated comfort and support.

“There was a breakfast corner where they had, like, brekky bars and juices and things like that. I think that was something that was really helpful for us, especially because we were just travelling all the time from home to the hospital, like 3–4 times a day. I think that was

something that really helped, kind of, my partner and I to bond to talk about our experience, [and] to just, kind of, take a bit of rest and have some food.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Families had some great ideas for LLTF in the future. They gave the below recommendations to maximise their reach and be more responsive to the individual needs of families.

- 1 Increase awareness and accessibility
- 2 Tailor resources to individual needs
- 3 Enhance emotional support offerings
- 4 Improve practical support
- 5 Standardise and expand the Breakfast Bar
- 6 Enhance community connection

LLTF’S IMPACT FOR FAMILIES

Parents shared that LLTF’s support helped them feel more grounded and connected during the stress of neonatal care. Through their stories, it became clear that LLTF’s resources often encouraged bonding, eased anxiety and supported parents to be more involved in their baby’s care — all things known to strengthen emotional well-being during this challenging time.

Parents shared that LLTF’s support genuinely helped their emotional well-being — from calming tools like affirmation cards and the Little Bag of Calm to creative outlets and peer connection. These thoughtful touches made many parents feel seen, supported and less alone during an incredibly overwhelming time.





"It's a wonderful thing that's able to be provided, and you know, any kind of little ray of hope in that, you know, turmoil in your life is wonderful. And it's lovely to have the support of the community."

From a survey of 226 respondents:

- ♥ 65% of babies spent time in both NICU and SCN
- ♥ 85% of the babies needed respiratory support after birth
- ♥ The overall average length of stay was 55 days with the shortest being 7 days and the longest 6 months
- ♥ 85.2% of families found the guidebooks to be helpful or very helpful

- ♥ 75.9 % of families who attended a NICU Connections event found them to be helpful or very helpful
- ♥ 76.7% found the Precious Prem pack (now Little Treasures Welcome Pack) to be helpful or very helpful, with 65.2% saying it had educated them on what to expect in NICU or SCN.

This document is summary of the evaluation report from a joint study between Life's Little Treasures Foundation and Australian Catholic University.

The full results of the study are reported in Hough, J. & Cooper, A. (2026). 'Leaving a little heart: Evaluating the impact of Life's Little Treasures Foundation's products and services for families and sick babies across Australia'. Australia. Australian Catholic University and Life's Little Treasures Foundation.