**APPENDIX 2: Thematic ‘map’ analysis**

**Fear of the unknown**

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| **Codes** | **Subthemes** | **Theme** |
| Overwhelming and rushed birthing environment | Urgency creates relative seriousness of the situation | **Fear of the unknown** creates an emotionally terrifying experience |
| Many individuals in birthing environment |
| Uncertainty in infant birthing outcome |
| Medical complications | Ongoing concerns surrounding having a preterm infant |
| Medical realities of prematurity |
| Stressful awareness of the lack of medical oversight | Continued worry over infant outcome after NICU stay |

**Mental Preparation**

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| **Codes** | **Subthemes** | **Theme** |
| Expected early delivery leads to greater preparation | Preparation for an early delivery | **Mental preparation** affects the emotional experience of early delivery, and involves a holistic approach around infant medical care, routine processes of the NICU, and events leading up to discharge |
| Unexpected early delivery leads to surprise and fear | Preparation for an NICU stay |
| NICU preparation around infant expectations |
| Logistical onboarding | Preparation for discharge home |
| NICU involvement |
| Determination of discharge and communication |
| Support from medical staff |
| Faith in child’s achievements |
| Gaining confidence and readiness for discharge |

**Identifying the Father’s role**

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| **Codes** | **Subthemes** | **Theme** |
| Perception of being in the way | Finding a place when baby is first born | Fathers searching for and **identifying their role,** wanting more involvement, and equal support to their partners |
| Feeling lost and out of place |
| Support for early involvement |
| Positive effect of holding |
| Dad as secondary parent | Wanting more involvement in the NICU and equal support to their partners |
| Support role |
| Information gatherers |
| NICU involvement |
| Searching for a role |

**Parenting with Supervision**

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| **Code** | **Theme** |
| Encouraged involvement as a positive | Fathers’ support and benefit from **parenting with supervision** in a positive NICU environment that encourages parental independence |
| Supported independence increased comfort and reduced anxiety |
| Inclusive environment and nursing attention |
| Needing permission to parent and wanting more independence |
| Physical environment |

**Effective communication**

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| **Code** | **Subthemes** | **Theme** |
| Communication around medical care a positive experience | Level of communication helps ease uncertainty and increases assurance by medical care | Fathers rely on **effective communication** to gather information to help reduce their anxiety, facilitate their support role for their partners, and to gain trust with the medical team |
| Lack of communication creates a negative experience |
| Knowledgeable | Effect of medical staff |
| Personal touch and attention |
| Supportive and reassuring |
| Perceived mistreatment |
| Communication and explanation | Communication with fathers as the information gatherers |
| Engagement |
| Information gathering |
| Communication around discharge | Discharge preparation |
| Medical staff support for discharge |

**Post-NICU Transition**

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| **Code** | **Subthemes** | **Theme** |
| Stressful awareness of the lack of medical oversight | Post-NICU medical care and support | **Post-NICU transition** benefits from a gradual separation from the NICU and a re-integration to home life |
| Post-discharge follow-up |
| Starting over | Recalibrating the care and establishing a new routine |
| Gaining confidence |
| Adjusting to 24/7 care |

**Family Life**

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| **Code** | **Subthemes** | **Theme** |
| Impact of external support | Balancing home, work, and hospital life | Fathers’ perspective of **family life** involves a balancing of competing demands between work, hospital, partner, and child |
| Competing demands between home and hospital |
| Establishing a routine |
| Working through the challenges of stress and fatigue on partner relationships | Teamwork through diversity |
| Relationship strengthening |
| Communication |
| Physical separation |
| Positive view of child irrespective of prematurity | Relationship to child |
| Bonding correlated to level of involvement |
| Anxiety over health and wellbeing of child post-NICU |