Tiny Preemie Gown
by Jeannie Downs Baumeister

See Pull-out for gown and bonnet patterns and instructions.

Until recently babies who were born prematurely often did not survive. Today, thanks to advanced medical technology, many more babies live and thrive. There are special considerations that must be made when clothing these tiny babies. I am the mother of a premature baby. My son Bret was born 3 months early and weighed only 2 lbs. 4 oz. It is my hope that these patterns will be used to clothe other babies who had the misfortune to be born too early.

There are many milestones that mark a baby's stay in the Neonatal Intensive Care Nursery. One of these milestones is the day that the baby's condition improves to the point that he is allowed to wear clothes. It is a joyous day for the parents and often comes unexpectedly. When this day came for Bret, I rushed out to buy him something to wear, only to find that nothing was available for these very premature babies—as babies born before 30 weeks gestation are called. These babies are so tiny that the traditional preemie clothes are much too big.

When word got out among my friends about Bret's lack of clothes, several dear ladies from my Smocking Guild devised and made lovely gowns for Bret. Words fail me when I try to express what this meant to me. The clothes were a visual sign that Bret was improving; they made him appear more like a little baby, and most of all they gave me hope. When my friends took the time to make these clothes for Bret, they were saying that they were not giving up on him, he would need these clothes.

A gift that a premature baby can wear, be it a gown or a bonnet, conveys a message to the parents that someone out there is thinking of them and cares about their baby. It also personalizes the baby for nurses who care for them and the baby's family, helping them to think of him as a person. It did much to improve my battered spirits. And Bret became the best-dressed preemie of Woman's Hospital NICU.

The Tiny Preemie Pattern is intended for the very premature baby and fits from 1 1/2 to 3 1/2 lbs. This is the first gown that I made for Bret. It is easy to make and comfortable to wear. It fits over an IV board and is easy to put on the baby.

Wearing a gown I made for him, I left with the feeling that he was wrapped in my love and a part of me was still with him.

Smocked Preemie Bonnets are made by the Red Stick Smocking Arts Guild for babies in the local hospitals both at Christmas and for Mother's Day. These babies need to wear caps to retain body heat, so these bonnets are both pretty and functional. Our members smock these bonnets with love and enthusiasm and the bonnets are very much appreciated by both the parents and staff of the hospitals.

My story has a happy ending. Today Bret is an active and normal (and cute) 2-year-old. He is the joy of my life. (Editor's note: see photograph of Bret on page 61.)

Special Considerations When Sewing for Low Birth Weight Preemies

The skin of the very premature baby is very thin and fragile and must be protected against any rough materials. Use the following guidelines:

1. Use a soft cotton or poly/cotton fabric. My favorite is a fine cotton flannel.
2. Finish the seams carefully so the inside of the gown is soft and comfortable.
3. No lace should be sewn where it will come in contact with the baby's skin. Even the cotton French lace is too rough for their sensitive skin. Use embroidery to embellish the clothes.
4. The plastic snap fasteners are my favorite. Ribbons came undone, and I was concerned about using velcro because of the roughness against baby's skin when it came undone (and it did come undone). Also, the velcro came undone in the wash and caught on other clothing, damaging the fabric.

For information about Premature Babies, read The Premature Baby Book by Helen Harrison.

Jeannie Baumeister is the owner of The Old Fashioned Baby.