

Neonatal Developmental Care Specialist Designation Participant Handbook



National Association of Neonatal Nurses

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Handbook Development

This handbook was developed by NANN's Developmental Care Specialist Designation (DCSD) Task Force and published in March 2026. The task force members are:

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Contact

Questions regarding the NANN DCSD or the information in this handbook should be directed to info@nann.org.

ABOUT THE NANN DCSD

The National Association of Neonatal Nurses (NANN) Neonatal Developmental Care Specialist Designation (DCSD) provides an opportunity for all neonatal healthcare professionals who have developmental care experience to apply and assess their knowledge. The designation is earned by passing an exam based on the text of *Developmental Care of Newborns & Infants*, 3rd Edition. The exam comprises 100 cognitive-assessment and case-based questions.

Earning the DCSD signifies expert knowledge in the provision of developmental care. Upon passing the exam, the learner will be awarded a certificate to signify their demonstration of the requisite knowledge and competencies in the practice of developmental care.

The DCSD is valid for 3 years from the date of passing, because the field of developmental care is constantly evolving. The neonatal healthcare professional is encouraged to maintain their designation, renewing it prior to expiration by demonstrating ongoing development and commitment to the provision of developmental care.

Achievement of the DCSD may be acknowledged through the use of the DCSD credential after the achiever's name, if desired. The credential may be displayed only while the designation is valid for that professional.

The DCSD:

- Validates competency through objective criteria
- Supports improved patient outcomes through elevated standards of care
- Elevates professional recognition through evidence-based education and standards
- Displays clinical expertise to an employer
- Aids in career mobility through the added value of specialized knowledge.

WHAT IS NEONATAL DEVELOPMENTAL CARE?

Neonatal developmental care is an integrative approach that supports infants and families. It emphasizes neuroprotection, psychosocial support, and compassionate, individualized, collaborative care.

Developmental care also:

- Promotes a compassionate, collaborative, and trauma-informed interprofessional approach to care
- Includes families as partners in decision making
- Creates a healing and developmentally supportive sensory environment
- Supports neuromotor development and self-regulation
- Protects sleep and optimal sleep-wake cycles
- Optimizes nutrition and establishes safe and positive feeding experiences
- Provides individualized infant and family-centered care, including optimizing skin-to-skin care

- Reduces and manages pain and stress while providing support during and after procedures
- Fosters progress in daily activities such as mobility, play, regulation, and feeding
- Supports the physiologic and psychosocial needs of infants and families from birth through the transition to home and beyond.

DESIGNATION, CERTIFICATION, OR CERTIFICATE PROGRAM?

The assessment-based DCSD combines the prestige and recognition of a designation with the competency validation of a certification.

	Designation	Certification	Certificate Program
Definition	A title or credential granted to a professional to acknowledge and signify expertise in a specialized field	A formal process by which a professional is evaluated and verified to meet standards and competencies put forth by a professional board	Educational course(s) designed to teach specific skills and knowledge in a specialized area
Purpose	Acknowledges a level of achievement or specialized knowledge	Validates an individual's expertise and skills in a particular area	Provides formal training in a specific subject
Example	NANN's Neonatal Developmental Care Specialist Designation (DCSD)	Registered Nurse Certified Certification for Neonatal Intensive Care Nursing (RNC-NIC)	A 3-month training program in neonatal care
Method of earning	Awarded based on education, experience, and passing an exam; renewal required	Completion of an accredited program and a standardized exam; usually requires renewal	Coursework, attendance, possibly an exam; no renewal is required

Learn more about designation, certification, and certificate programs from the [Institute for Credentialing Excellence](#).

The benefits of earning the NANN DCSD include:

- **Acknowledgment of Expertise:** The designation recognizes neonatal professionals who have the expertise necessary to support the holistic growth and developmental progress of infants in the NICU.
- **Validation of Expertise:** Earning the designation showcases the neonatal professional's ability to provide individually focused, developmentally appropriate, and supportive neonatal care, as well as individualized, family-centered care.
- **Professional Recognition:** Clinicians who pass the exam will receive proof of recognition in the form of a printable certificate of designation as a Developmental Care Specialist.

- **Leadership Advancement:** The DCSD positions individuals to implement developmental care practices into their units, lead developmental care quality-improvement projects, and work with their hospitals to increase education regarding developmental care.
- **Continuous Learning:** The renewal process ensures that DCSD holders remain knowledgeable regarding up-to-date, best practices in developmental care. (See section [DCSD Renewal](#) for details).

The NANN DCSD provides value to the designee, including:

- **Improved Patient and Family Outcomes:** By integrating developmentally supportive and family-centered care into daily practice, neonatal professionals can significantly improve the physical, emotional, and neurological wellbeing of neonates and their families.
- **Evidence-Based Practice:** This designation is grounded in the latest research and best practices, ensuring that developmental care is evidence-based.
- **Professional Growth:** The process of obtaining and renewing the designation encourages continuous learning and professional growth.
- **Collaboration:** The designation involves collaboration between neonatal professionals, fostering a multidisciplinary approach to care.

DEVELOPMENT/HISTORY

NANN created the DCSD in 2010 in recognition of the critical role of developmental care plays in promoting optimal patient and family outcomes. The exam has continued to evolve in alignment with the *Developmental Care of Newborns and Infants: A Guide for Health Professionals*, currently in its third edition.

REQUIREMENTS

No experience is required to take this exam. However, candidates should be competent in the subject matter, want to further their knowledge, and be interested in applying developmental care in their practice.

PREPARATION MATERIALS

This exam is based entirely on the [Developmental Care of Newborns and Infants: A Guide for Health Professionals, 3rd edition](#). NANN endorses the preparation materials below and encourages candidates to focus on the textbook for preparation.

Endorsed Preparation Materials

- Neonatal Developmental Care Specialist Designation Participant Handbook
- *Developmental Care of Newborns and Infants: A Guide for Health Professionals, 3rd edition*
- Developmental Care Specialist Free Practice Test (a scenario with 5 questions and 10 knowledge questions) – part of NANN’s Developmental Care Specialist Exam Readiness Toolkit, found on iLearn

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON NEONATAL DEVELOPMENTAL CARE

The DCSD exam is based solely on *Developmental Care of Newborns and Infants: A Guide for Health Professionals, 3rd edition*. However, the following materials may improve your understanding of neonatal developmental care principles.

Peer-Reviewed Journals

- *Advances in Neonatal Care*
- *Neonatal Network: The Journal of Neonatal Nursing*
- *The Journal of Perinatal & Neonatal Nursing*
- *Neonatology Today*

Professional and Clinical Organizations

- Newborn Individualized Developmental Care and Assessment Program (NIDCAP)
- National Perinatal Association
- National Association of Neonatal Therapists (NANT)
- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)
- Family-Centered Care (FCC) Taskforce

Collaborative Networks, Standards Groups, and Advocacy Organizations

- March of Dimes
- NICU Parent Network
- Vermont Oxford Network
- The Gravens Conference
- Developmental Care Standards for Infants in Intensive Care

DCSD EXAM LEARNING OUTCOMES

As a result of passing the DCSD exam, the neonatal healthcare professional will have:

- Demonstrated knowledge of developmental care practices
- Validated expertise in developmental care
- Achieved professional recognition
- Committed to continued education and professional growth.

EXAM ADMINISTRATION

The self-paced online exam for the DCSD is immediately available upon purchase from NANN's iLearn site. Participants have 90 days from the date of purchase to complete this exam. If the exam is not taken within the 90-day window, the participant must repurchase the product.

No notes or study materials may be used while taking the closed-book exam.

To renew the designation, purchase the Developmental Care Specialist Designation Renewal from NANN's iLearn site. It will be available for purchase starting 90 days before the designation is set to expire.

EXAM DESIGN, SCORING, & RETAKES

The exam is a 100-item multiple-choice test (80 knowledge-based and 20 scenario-based questions) assessing the participant's knowledge, skills, and competence related to developmental care practices.

Test takers demonstrate their understanding of evidence-based practices aligned with the third edition of *Developmental Care of Newborns and Infants: A Guide for Health Professionals*. Participants have one attempt to pass the nontimed exam.

Test takers must score at least 80% on knowledge-based questions to advance to scenario-based questions. The combined overall exam score also must be at least 80% to pass and earn the DCSD.

Individuals who receive a score of 70%-79% are encouraged to retake the exam. If needed, an option to retake the exam at a lower cost can be purchased in iLearn. Please note, the exam retake option becomes available to test takers following the original purchase of the exam. When the exam retake is purchased, NANN staff must approve the retake-exam purchase during regular business hours before the participant will be able to access the retake exam.

To retake the exam, test takers must:

- Purchase the retake exam within 15 business days of the first attempt to pass the exam.
- Take the retake exam within 30 days of NANN staff approval.

NANN recommends that individuals who score 69% or lower should wait until they have increased confidence in their knowledge to repurchase the exam.

To obtain their DCSD, participants must complete the following:

- Purchase the DCSD exam
- Pass the exam with a score of 80% or higher
- Provide feedback on the DCSD process via a survey.

DCSD RENEWAL

The DCSD must be renewed every 3 years to ensure a continued demonstration of competence in developmental care practices. The actual expiration date of a designation is 3 years following the date of the previous exam passage (i.e., a participant who passed their exam on January 1, 2025, would expect their designation to expire on January 1, 2028). Renewal must occur before the expiration date.

NANN verifies designation exam dates and expiration via iLearn and the DCSD holder's dated certificate. NANN also emails reminders to candidates of upcoming expiration at 60 days, 30 days, 15 days, 5 days, and 1 day until expiration. It is the responsibility of the candidate to

complete the renewal process prior to designation expiration. NANN’s iLearn site allows participants to begin their renewal process 90 days before their designation’s expiration date.

There are two methods for renewing the DCSD: renewing by taking the DCSD exam or manual renewal through submission of contact hours. These options reflect that professional development and maintenance of developmental care practices can be achieved through a variety of professional and educational activities.

Exam Renewal

The DCSD holder passes the DCSD exam with a score of 80% or higher. This renewal exam is structured and scored like the initial exam and is subject to the same terms for retaking the exam. See section [Exam Design, Scoring, & Retakes](#) for details.

Manual Renewal

The DCSD holder submits 20 contact hours—5 of which must be specific to developmental care—earned within the current 3-year designation cycle or provides documentation of other evidence-based practices or advances in developmental care. Required contact hours may be earned through NANN or other providers.

The DCSD Task Force audits a selection of manual renewal applications each year. Portions of the audit process may be done, in part, by artificial intelligence. Renewal candidates whose applications have been selected for audit will be notified via email. Task force members will review the developmental care-based contact hours to ensure they are based on developmental care. If this cannot be verified, the candidate must submit a copy of the activity objectives and an outline of the content when contacted. Failure to provide the required information will result in cancellation of the DCSD renewal application, with all fees and designation status forfeited.

Published articles (up to 4 CE each), podium presentations (up to 3 CE each), and presented posters (up to 2 CE each) related to developmental care may make up a portion of the required contact hours on developmental care topics. Student assignments and projects do not qualify. To submit work for consideration, email education@nann.org. The DCSD task force will review submissions to determine how many contact hours qualify as part of a designees renewal. These submissions will be considered on a case-by-case basis, and NANN staff can help with renewal questions.

Fees

	NANN Member	Nonmember
Exam Fee	\$179	\$259
Retake Exam Fee	\$99	\$129
Exam Renewal Fee	\$179	\$259
Manual Renewal Fee	\$179	\$259