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Why parents can't stop cuddling little Rhys

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A YEAR ago Rhys Harris' family dared not think about 2008.

Each and every day was a fight for little Rhys, as he battled with a rare genetic condition called Nemo, which attacks the immune system.

Even after the six-year-old had a life-saving bone marrow transplant his devoted parents could not spontaneously hug or kiss him because he had to live in strict isolation in a "bubble" to protect his new immune system.

His mum and dad, who like any parent instinctively wanted to hold their ill son, could only look on as Rhys was confined to the sterile ward.

It was, they say, one of the most heartbreaking experiences they could have faced.

But today, on New Year's Eve, his family from Newbridge, Caerphilly county, who have been astounded by the youngster's amazing recovery, are looking forward to the year ahead.

And they are busy making up for lost time, giving the youngster all the cuddles and kisses he could ever want.

"At the time it was extremely difficult. It was a tough regime," his dad Keith, 43, said.

"We couldn't even hug him or kiss him and even that had to be kept to a bare minimum just in case we passed on an infection that could kill him.

"Since he has been home we have been making up for lost time with lots of cuddling."

Without a bone marrow transplant doctors gave Rhys just 12 to 18 months to live. But in September the Harris family, dad Kevin, mum Dawn, a former beautician, and Morgan, five, heard the news they had been longing for. A bone marrow match – not perfect but acceptable – had been found for Rhys in the United States.

It was to be the beginning of a momentous new chapter in their lives – one which began with them contemplating life without their son, but which ended with Rhys out of hospital and home in time for Christmas.

After the match was found his family moved to Newcastle and set up home in a flat not far from the city's main hospital, one of only two in Britain where complicated bone marrow procedures to save Rhys' life could be carried out.

The bone marrow was flown from America days before the operation took place.

After the transplant Rhys, who was left almost totally deaf after suffering from meningitis at the age of nine months, lived in the air-tight chamber to prevent any risk of infection. His parents could only cuddle him after being surgically scrubbed.

Doctors originally predicted he would have to stay in the bubble for up to nine months, but were astonished when Rhys left the hospital to go home less than two months after his life-saving treatment.

Now the Harris family have just been able to enjoy Christmas together at their temporary home close to the hospital – a feat no-one could have predicted this time last year.

“With Rhys here we have just had the best Christmas present,” said Keith, who travelled with the family to Lapland for Christmas 2006 as a special treat for the youngster.

“We’ve been given a miracle because Christmas Day was one Rhys may not have had and we are so grateful.

“We had a lovely, family day together.”

Little Rhys’ progress has delighted doctors and his army of supporters, who were not only touched by his plight, but who pitched in to help the Harris family.

After rugby mad Rhys’s condition – diagnosed in 2004 and which affects just 35 people in the world – became public, the world of Welsh rugby, business, schools and more have been fundraising for his family and publicising the Nemo and bone marrow causes.

A Cardiff Blues fan, Rhys was proudly chosen as the mascot for the World Cup warm-up match at the Millennium Stadium last August, prior to the family relocating to Newcastle for his operation.

Kevin said: “The rugby boys like Michael Owen of the Dragons have been fantastic throughout. Rhys has brought together some long-term friendships that we will treasure for ever.

“We had a wonderful charity ball which my all-time rugby legend, Jonathan Davies, hosted and made me cry with laughter.

“We met all the Welsh Clubs and they have all been fantastic to Rhys.”

But one moment which stands out particularly this last year came when tiny Rhys met the late, great rugby legend Ray Gravell only a short time before his death.

“We had taken Rhys to see the Ospreys play Stade Francais when this great bear of a man came over who was Grav,” said Kevin.

“It was a lovely, touching moment because Grav was such a massive man and Rhys so tiny.”

As 2007 fades into 2008, the family is looking forward to a bright future for their son.

They are even hoping to come home to South Wales in the spring. But for now they are taking everything one step at a time.

“We are not out of the woods for another six months. The main thing is we have to watch for the chance that his body could still reject the bone marrow,” said Kevin.

To have gone through what Rhys, his parents and his little brother have is unimaginable, but as Kevin explained, the family has had to stick together and be strong.

As we all wish each other a Happy New Year in the coming days the whole of South Wales and beyond will be doing so especially for the brave youngster and his family.