

Fact Sheets for Families

Never Shake a Baby!

Each year, more than 1,300 American children are forcefully shaken by their caretakers. Powerful or violent acts of shaking may lead to serious brain damage—a condition called “shaken baby syndrome” (SBS). The American Academy of Pediatrics, an organization of 55,000 pediatricians, pediatric medical sub-specialists and pediatric surgical specialists, considers shaken baby syndrome to be a clear and serious form of child abuse. Shaken baby syndrome often involves children younger than 2 years but may be seen in children up to 5 years of age.

What is shaken baby syndrome?

The term “shaken baby syndrome” is used for the internal head injuries a baby or young child sustains from being violently shaken. Babies and young children have very weak neck muscles to control their heavy heads. If shaken, their heads wobble rapidly back and forth, which can result in the brain being bruised from banging against the skull wall.

Generally, shaking happens when someone gets frustrated with a baby or small child. Usually the shaker is fed up with constant crying. However, many adults enjoy tossing children in the air, mistaking the child’s excitement and anxious response for pleasure. Tossing children, even gently, may be harmful and can cause major health problems later on in life.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Signs of shaken baby syndrome may vary from mild and nonspecific to severe. Although there may be no obvious external signs of injury following shaking, the child may suffer internal injuries. Shaking can cause brain damage, partial or total blindness, deafness, learning problems, retardation, cerebral palsy, seizures, speech difficulties and even death.

Damage from shaking may not be noticeable for years. It

could show up when the child goes to school and is not able to keep up with classmates.

Tips for prevention

Shaken baby syndrome is completely preventable.

- Never shake a baby—not in anger, impatience, play, or for any reason.
- Avoid tossing small children into the air.

Address the causes of crying to reduce stress

Caregivers and parents can become exhausted and angry when a baby cries incessantly. Some babies cry a lot when they are hungry, wet, tired or just want company. Some infants cry at certain times. Feeding and changing them may help, but sometimes even that does not work.

If a young child in your care cries a lot, try the following:

- Make sure all of the baby’s basic needs are met.
- Feed the baby slowly and burp the baby often.
- Offer the baby a pacifier, if supplied by parents.
- Hold the baby against your chest and walk or rock him/her.
- Sing to the baby or play soft music.
- Take the baby for a ride in a stroller or car.
- Be patient. If you find you cannot calmly care for the baby or have trouble controlling your anger, take a break. Ask someone else to take care of the baby or put him/her in a safe place to cry it out.
- If the crying continues, the child should be seen by a health care provider.

No matter how impatient or angry you feel, never shake a baby!


References

National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome.

American Academy of Pediatrics, *Policy Statement: Pediatrics* Volume 108, Number 1, July 2001, pp. 206-210.

California Childcare Health Program, *Health and Safety in the Child Care Setting: Prevention of Injuries*.

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Provided by California Childcare Health Program
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