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For More Information

Contact:

1319 Colony Street
Saskatoon, SK S7N 2Z1
Bus. 306.651.4300
Fax. 306.651.4301
info@skprevention.ca
www.skprevention.ca

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Shaken Baby Syndrome

What is Shaken Baby Syndrome?

Shaken baby syndrome is a condition that occurs when a baby or young child is violently shaken. Infants under six months of age are at a greater risk of being victims of shaken baby syndrome. In over 70% of cases, the adult responsible for shaking a baby is male. Shaken baby syndrome is a form of abusive head trauma. Most often inconsolable crying is the given reason for why an adult has shaken a baby.

Why do babies CRY?

All babies cry. Crying is the only way babies have to communicate with others. They might need to eat, to have their diaper changed or to be held. A baby may be too hot or too cold or in pain. Sometimes babies cry because they need to release some tension of their own or for no known reason at all. Crying is normal. The amount of time a baby spends crying differs between babies and varies with age and health. Crying typically begins to increase at two weeks of age and may last until four or five months of age. If you are worried about a baby's health because they are crying, take the baby to a doctor or health care professional.

Why do Parents and Caregivers become FRUSTRATED and ANGRY?

Crying is an annoying sound. It is supposed to be. If crying was a pleasant sound, it would be easy to ignore and a baby's needs would never be met. Unfortunately, parents and caregivers are not always able to stop a baby's crying. Parents or caregivers may begin to doubt their abilities to care for a baby that cries often or cannot be consoled. Sometimes parents or caregivers believe that a crying baby is misbehaving on purpose. Lack of sleep and other life stresses can increase the feelings of helplessness and frustration for a parent or caregiver.

What can Parents or Caregivers do?

Make a plan for what to do when a baby cries. It is okay to ask for help. Stay calm. A frustrated or angry parent or caregiver will have a hard time consoling a baby. If a parent or caregiver feels like they may not be able to control their emotions, they need to take a break. It is more important for you to stay calm than to stop the crying. Never Shake a Baby.

Ways to Soothe a Baby

- Check if baby wants to eat or needs to have a diaper change
- Rhythmic motions - gently rock baby, take baby for a walk in a stroller or carrier, take baby for a car ride
- Rhythmic sounds - play music, sing a lullaby to baby, talk softly, put the dishwasher or washing machine on, run the vacuum
- Comforting touches - give baby a warm bath, cuddle baby, massage baby's back, wrap or swaddle baby in a blanket
- Take away excessive distractions such as lights, noises and movement

Things that work one time to comfort a baby may not work the next time. Sometimes when a baby cries there is nothing wrong and nothing can be done to comfort him or her.

Ways for a Parent or Caregiver to Calm Down

If feeding, changing, walking, rocking, talking and singing have not worked, a baby may be gently placed in a safe place such as their crib and allowed to cry alone for a few minutes. A parent or caregiver may leave the baby's room to calm down. An alarm should be set for no more than 10 to 15 minutes.

Parents and caregivers can try the following:

- Take a shower
- Exercise
- Count to 100
- Squeeze something soft such as a pillow
- Read
- Do a crossword puzzle
- Write down the five best things about yourself
- Write down the five best things about your baby
- Call someone you can trust such as a neighbor, relative or friend

It is NEVER Okay to Shake a Baby

Shaking a baby in a moment of frustration can cause serious harm or death. When an infant is shaken, the head whips backward and forward causing the brain to hit the inside of the skull and to undergo rotational forces. Injury occurs when the brain hits the inside of the skull and when the rotational forces cause blood vessels in and around the brain to be damaged. Damaged blood vessels bleed into the brain and into the space between the brain and the skull. Bleeding and swelling of the brain causes a lack of blood and oxygen to reach the brain, resulting in further injury to the brain. The damage to a baby's brain from shaking can cause permanent disability or death.

What Happens to Shaken Babies?

As many as 1 out of every 5 victims of shaken baby syndrome die. The survivors often suffer lifelong disabilities due to the acquired brain injury from shaking.

Disabilities include:

- Blindness
- Paralysis
- Cognitive and learning disabilities
- Seizures
- Growth problems
- Broken Bones

As few as 1 out of every 13 survivors will have no sign of neurological impairment.

Can Other Activities Cause Injuries Similar to Shaken Baby Syndrome?

The injuries seen due to shaking a baby cannot be caused by activities such as play, an accidental fall from a couch or a resuscitation attempt. Babies have weak neck muscles and very large and heavy heads and even a few seconds of forceful shaking can cause serious injury. Parents and caregivers should always consider the fragility of a baby's brain and the need for head and neck support.

How Can Shaken Baby Syndrome be Prevented?

Providing information on the care and normal development of infants and children is an essential element in the prevention of shaken baby syndrome. It is important that parents and caregivers understand that they are not alone in their feelings of frustration. Learning how to handle feelings when caring for a crying baby can be made easier through community education and support programs.

All caregivers need to understand to NEVER SHAKE A BABY. Parents should ensure that babysitters and daycare providers are informed and experienced.

Information for this fact sheet was adapted from:

Canadian Paediatric Surveillance Program
Recognizing and Preventing Head Injury Secondary to Suspected Child Maltreatment 2005

Bonnier, C et al. *Outcome and prognosis of whiplash shaken infant syndrome; Late consequences after a symptom-free interval. Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology 1995; 37*

Joint Statement on Shaken Baby Syndrome 2001

BC Children's Hospital.
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Alberta Child Abuse Prevention Network,
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