



BRAIN INJURY ASSOCIATION OF NEW JERSEY

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Helpline: 1-800-669-4323

No Brain Injury is
Too Mild to Ignore,
or Too Severe to
Lose Hope

Shaken Baby Syndrome: The Facts and Hard Realities

By Kim Kang

Every year an estimated 3,000 children are diagnosed with shaken baby syndrome (SBS), a traumatic brain injury caused by child abuse. Twenty-five percent of these children will die while 60 percent sustain permanent lifelong disabilities. In addition, the life expectancy of SBS survivors is often predicted to be much shorter than their unaffected peers. A moment of lost control by an adult caregiver all too often ends in this senseless tragedy for children, families and society. Therefore, it is important that the general public and professionals know the facts about shaken baby syndrome and understand the importance of prevention education.

Shaken baby syndrome is a serious traumatic brain injury caused when an individual shakes a child, usually less than one year of age. The American Academy of Pediatrics further defines SBS as an act "of shaking/slamming that is so violent that any competent individuals observing the shaking would recognize it was dangerous." The trigger is typically a crying, inconsolable child. Symptoms of SBS can range from lethargy, irritability, decreased appetite and vomiting to the more severe symptoms of difficulty breathing, seizures and unconsciousness. The milder symptoms of SBS are often mistaken for flu or colic by medical professionals. One study found that even the most serious cases are misdiagnosed up to 30% of the time. Shaken baby syndrome is diagnosed by performing a CT (computerized tomography) scan or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), both x-rays of the head, coupled with a complete ophthalmological examination to detect retinal hemorrhages (bleeding in the eyes). It is very important that anyone who suspects that a child is suffering from shaken baby syndrome seek immediate medical care for the child.

The outcome for children diagnosed with shaken baby syndrome is permanent, irreparable brain damage or death. Survivors often sustain cerebral palsy, paralysis, epilepsy, blindness, deafness and learning/behavioral disorders.

Who is most likely to do this to our babies? A Colorado study found that 37% of the abusers were the biological fathers. Boyfriends accounted for 20.5% of abusers, 17.3% were female child care providers and 12.6% were mothers. Female babysitters were also noted in this study as a significant proportion of abusers that more easily escape prosecution.

Given the tragic outcome of shaken baby syndrome, it is important that caregivers of small children be provided information on positive coping skills when dealing with a crying baby.



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If a baby is crying, caregivers should:

Make sure all of the baby's basic needs (food, diapering, appropriate clothing, etc) are met.

Offer the baby a pacifier.

Take the baby for a walk in a stroller or ride in the car.

Walk the baby around in a "snuggly" body carrier.

Call a friend, relative or neighbor to come over for support and/or take care of the child while you take a break.

Put the baby in the crib making sure he/she is safe, close the door and leave.

Check on him/her every five minutes or so.

Call the national help lines provided by Childhelp USA (800-4-A-CHILD) or National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (800-CHILDREN).

If you are a child care provider and cannot handle a crying baby, please let a parent know and do not be afraid to tell him/her that you feel you cannot care for his/her baby.

It is also important to note that some published CPR guidelines for infants (less than 1 year old) and children (1-8 years old) , instruct the rescuer to "shake and shout." **It is very important that caregivers understand that under no circumstances should they shake an infant or child as part of CPR.**

Lastly, why is prevention education so important? Right now, between 25-50% of the American public is unaware that shaking a child is dangerous. This alone is a recipe for disaster. The present recipe equals dead or disabled children, struggling families of affected children and a large end cost to society. For families the emotional and financial burdens can be staggering. If a child does survive, families are often left struggling to hold their family together while attempting to meet the complex medical, rehabilitative and educational needs for this child. Medical and rehabilitative costs for a traumatic brain injury such as SBS can reach well into millions of dollars for a lifetime of care, millions of dollars paid by the family and taxpayers that would best have been served by investing in prevention education. Lack of prevention education also plays a role in the criminal judicial process. Uneducated law enforcement officials, prosecutors, judges and juries generally know little to nothing about shaken baby syndrome, which makes them unprepared and very apprehensive



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about convicting and sentencing anyone, even a true child abuser. Consequently, child abusers are released back into the public with access to children and the risk of continuing violence against children in their care. Aside from all of the statistical and monetary facts, there is another reason why there should be major emphasis on prevention education—because it is the most humanitarian thing that can be done to end the senseless treatment of these children. SBS destroys lives, devastates families and denigrates our society.

Ways You Can Help

There are many things that as an individual you can do to effect change and save a life:

Educate:

Volunteer at your community and statewide prevention agencies to give prevention presentations and workshops. Contact The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) at the phone number below to locate the prevention agency nearest you.

Donate:

Many agencies need your support to continue their prevention programs. Prevention efforts overall are largely under funded in the United States and your donation could literally help save a life.

Advocate:

Find out if your local hospitals provide SBS information to new parents. If not, advocate that they do so.

Find out if SBS education is part of your state child care licensing training requirement. If not, write the Director of your state licensing department and request that it be included.

Report:

If you suspect a child has been shaken, report it to the police and Child Care Protective Services immediately.

Parents with children in child care should also consider themselves mandated reporters of child abuse. In many instances, previous "unexplained" injuries of other children in a child care setting were never reported, the end result has been the next "unfortunate" child who sustained serious abuse, such as shaken baby syndrome.



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Legislate:

Write your legislators, proposing a state or national SBS education program, to be implemented to the general public, including school aged children and child care providers. Be sure to build funding into your legislative proposal.

Support:

If you would like to assist a SBS victim or victim family, please contact The Shaken Baby Alliance at the number below. We have numerous ways you can show your love and support for families who need to rebuild their belief in humanity.

SBS Information Resources

- o The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect
(800) FYI-3366
- o SBS PREVENTION PLUS
(800) 858-5222
- o The Shaken Baby Alliance
(817) 444-9357
- o Parents Against Child Abuse
(909) 699-4800
- o National Information, Support, and Referral Service for
Shaken Baby Syndrome
(888) 273-0071

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