

# How can DCF social workers help prevent Shaken Baby Syndrome?

Shaken Baby Syndrome is the most common cause of death from child abuse. There are about 20 cases reported in Massachusetts each year, including up to 4 fatalities yearly. There are about 1,200 cases nationally each year. Most victims are less than one year old.

## What is Shaken Baby Syndrome?

Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS) is a medical term for a collection of serious injuries that result when a baby is violently shaken. Shaking can cause severe, permanent brain damage, resulting in blindness, mental retardation, seizures, and death. It is also often called Shaken Impact Syndrome because in many cases the infant's head is thrown or hit against a hard surface in addition to shaking. Some victims have rib fractures where the perpetrator violently grasped their torso. About half also have partially healed fractures of the ribs or thigh bone, or head injuries, from earlier abuse, not necessarily shaking.

Shaken Baby Syndrome does not result from accidental falls. It is not caused by normal activities like vigorous fun play, or bouncing or jiggling a baby. It is an assault.

There are also less severe injuries caused by shaking. Some people are unaware that *any* shaking of a child or infant can cause brain damage. Because there is no bleeding or visible bruising, some people believe shaking is an appropriate method of "discipline." Those people may shake babies and children on purpose, and in a controlled way. They might not shake hard enough to break bones or put the child into a coma, but this less severe shaking can potentially cause permanent harm, without any obvious signs or symptoms at the time. Some pediatricians believe that this kind of shaking may be the cause of many cases of mild mental retardation, and learning disabilities.

The goal is to prevent both out-of-control episodes of shaking that cause death or severe permanent damage, and less severe, more controlled shaking that the parents and other caretakers genuinely don't realize is dangerous.

## Who shakes a baby?

We don't know why some people lose control and violently shake an infant. There are no known risk factors. Crying seems to be the immediate trigger.

Families of victims are economically similar to the rest of the population, they are rarely teenage parents, and they usually have one or two children. About two thirds of perpetrators are male; fathers are the most common perpetrators and mothers' boyfriends or stepfathers are the next most common. When perpetrators are female, they may be mothers or babysitters.

A caretaker who is not deeply bonded to the baby may be at greater risk. Adults who are used to violence against children, like slapping and spanking, might be more likely to shake or hit a baby. Adults who have experienced violence themselves as children or have had prior episodes of violence in their lives might be more likely to shake or hit a baby.

## Everyone needs to know about the dangers of shaking

We can't predict which adults are more likely to shake a baby. That's why **everyone** needs to know how dangerous shaking is, how to handle the stress and frustration of caring for a crying baby, and what to realistically expect of a baby.

## How could this happen?

Many factors probably combine to cause adults to lose control and shake a baby. Unrealistic expectations may be one factor. The adorable, responsive smiling baby seen in the media is very different from the real infant—red-faced from screaming—who keeps an exhausted caretaker up all night.

Misunderstandings about infant development may be another reason. Some parents believe that a baby who doesn't stop crying "hates" them or is "trying to manipulate" them. Adults who shake a baby probably don't handle stress well, or they may find infant crying overwhelmingly painful or enraging.

## How can you help prevent SBS?

First, make sure everyone knows how dangerous it is to shake a baby or child even for a few seconds. Talk to men as well as women. Mothers are less likely than fathers or other male caretakers to shake a baby, so be sure to address fathers, mother's boyfriends, and other men in the household, not just the mother. Brochures to help educate your clients are available from DPH. Call 617-624-5463 to order copies.

Everyone needs to know the dangers of shaking, but that's not enough. Prevention means teaching everyone how to comfort a crying baby, how to handle their own anger and frustration, and when it's right to put the baby down and take a break. Be clear with parents and other caretakers that you don't suspect them of doing anything wrong, but that you educate everyone about Shaken Baby Syndrome.

## Real babies, real crying

Teach basic child development and reasonable expectations of an infant. Some babies are easy to comfort. Some need more attention but will usually respond to caretakers who try many soothing strategies and figure out what works with a particular baby. But some babies cry for hours, and are impossible to console. Help parents and other adults understand that this baby is crying because of her own internal distress, not because she hates her parent, rejects a particular caretaker, or is trying to manipulate adults. Let them know that good parents sometimes have difficult babies who cry a lot. It may be useful to encourage adults to try to imagine how the baby feels. Sometimes this can help build empathy for the baby rather than anger at the baby.

## Learning to comfort a crying baby

Help parents and other caretakers learn skills to comfort a crying baby. DPH brochures offer instructions on many ways to soothe crying infants. When parents are successful in helping their baby feel better, they will be more bonded to the baby and feel better about themselves. Even if they aren't successful right away, knowing what to try can help parents feel more optimistic and in control.

## Learning to handle frustration

In talking with parents and other caretakers, acknowledge how loud, piercing, and upsetting a baby's cry is, and how hard it is to listen to it for a long time. Talk with parents about paying attention to their own feelings. Everyone gets frustrated, angry, and overwhelmed at times. Everyone needs to recognize these feelings, and handle them in a healthy way.

It only takes a few minutes to teach parents how to calm down by sitting quietly, and breathing slowly and deeply. This can help a parent step back from nearly losing control. He may realize that he needs a break from the baby.

Tell everyone who cares for an infant in your caseload that **if they become very frustrated or angry, then the right thing to do is to put the baby down on her back in a safe place, and take the time to calm down.** The adult can go into the next room and focus on calming down. He or she should check on the baby after a few minutes, but **never** pick up the baby while still angry.

Plan for ways to shut out the sound of crying and relax for a few minutes. Some suggestions include listening to music on headphones, or taking a shower with the bathroom fan on. Remind parents not to leave the baby alone in the house or apartment, and to check on the baby every 10 to 15 minutes even if they are not ready to pick the baby up. Ask parents to think about who they could call at a time like that, such as a friend or family member, just to talk. **The Parental Stress Line offers free anonymous Phone Support, 24/7 at 1-800-632-8188.**

Talking about managing stress can be a chance to reinforce other important messages, such as safe places to put a baby down. Babies should be placed in a crib, **never** on a couch, in a bed with other children, or with fluffy pillows or quilts. A baby should always sleep on his back, never on his stomach or side.

Providing support and information to parents about handling stress not only prevents Shaken Baby Syndrome, but can also prevent other kinds of child abuse.

**If you see someone shake a baby  
...even for a second  
...even if it's not very hard,  
speak to your supervisor about what to do.**

## Taking better care of babies

There are lots of things you want to accomplish when you are working with parents in your caseload. But Shaken Baby Syndrome prevention doesn't take long, and can help you reach your other goals in working with families. Shaken Baby Syndrome prevention helps parents take better care of babies overall.

**For more information,** contact The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Violence and Injury Prevention, Shaken Baby Syndrome Prevention Initiative at 617-624-5490 or [www.mass.gov/dph/fch](http://www.mass.gov/dph/fch).