

and Native American infants are nearly three times as likely.

The good news is that research has uncovered some very useful information about risk factors associated with SIDS and the prevention of its occurrence. **We can stop babies from dying.** Since 1992, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has recommended that babies be put to sleep on their backs in order to reduce the incidence of SIDS. There is compelling evidence that this simple act can save babies' lives.

The "Back to Sleep" public education campaign, instituted to increase awareness of the dangers of putting babies to sleep on their stomachs, has demonstrated great success. The Pampers Parenting Institute, of which I am a member, has joined the campaign to educate parents and caregivers by printing "Back to Sleep" on every newborn diaper as a helpful reminder to put babies to sleep on their backs. In addition, the National Black Child Development Institute has combined efforts with Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, National Coalition of 100 Black Women, and the Congress of National Black Churches to insure that African American families and caregivers are getting the message and to eradicate the disparity by 2005.

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Saving Babies in Our Communities

by Evelyn K. Moore

TThere are few things in life more precious than a sleeping baby. At one time or another, we have all stood over a baby at rest, marveling at her serenity and falling in love with her innocence. Regardless of how hectic the day has been, how much the baby cried, or how big the mess created by a wide-eyed infant — when that baby is sleeping peacefully, mother, father, grandparent, and caregiver may finally breathe a sigh of relief. Throughout the day, we are ever so vigilant to insure that small toys, dangerous chemicals, and sharp objects are out of baby's reach. We check to make sure that all electrical sockets are covered, safety caps and locks are on, stairways are blocked, and that every corner of the baby's environment is adequately baby proofed. We put her to sleep feeling confident that all is well. After all, a baby's crib should be the safest place for an infant; yet thousands of healthy babies are put to bed each year never to awake.

One little-known culprit is SIDS, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. It refers to the sudden unexplained death of an infant under one year of age. And because it most often strikes infants while they are sleeping, it is also known as "crib death." SIDS is the leading cause of death for infants one month to one year

old, occurring most often between two and four months of age. Nearly 3,000 infants each year lose their lives to this unexplained phenomenon. All children are susceptible to SIDS — regardless of race and socioeconomic level — although African American infants are more than twice as likely to die of SIDS

As more parents and caregivers put babies to sleep on their backs, fewer babies are dying from SIDS. Between 1992 and 1997, SIDS deaths in the United States decreased by 40%, saving the lives of approximately 2,000 babies each year. And yet, still 3,000 babies die from SIDS each year. A disproportionate number are African American and Native American babies.

One Story

However, the statistics do not begin to tell the story of the devastation and heartbreak that a parent endures when faced with the death of an infant.

Camilla Lewis (names have been changed to protect privacy) knows the monumental pain and endless void that accompanies the loss of a child. A year ago, she was celebrating the birth of her first child — a beautiful, healthy, seven-pound baby girl named Tasha. At three months old, Tasha had already begun sleeping through the night, though Camilla reported that she refused to sleep on her back. Tasha would wake up when placed on her back and so her mother would lay her baby down on her side to insure a good night's sleep.

One hot summer day, Camilla noticed a rash in the folds of Tasha's chubby neck. Conscientious mother that she was, she took Tasha in to see the pediatrician. The doctor assured her that it was common and instructed her to keep the area dry. At 15 pounds, Tasha was found to be developing well and given a clean bill of health.

Two days later, Camilla walked into her baby girl's room to get her ready to start the day. Tasha had rolled onto her stomach but her head was propped up slightly on the bedding. At first, Camilla thought her daughter was already awake, but then she noticed how very still she was. She reached down to touch her baby and immediately

noticed the coldness of her feet, which were usually quite warm and pink. It was then that Camilla knew something was very wrong.

Somehow the young mother managed to call to her nephew who had spent the night and instructed him to call 911 as she lifted the cold, still infant from her crib. She retrieved an emergency procedure card she had received from the hospital and began administering CPR. In five minutes, the ambulance arrived and the paramedics — visibly shocked by the lifeless infant — took her away. Camilla, her husband, and other family members gathered at the hospital to hear the announcement that she already felt in her heart. Her baby girl was gone.

Three weeks later, the grieving parents moved from their house, unable to bear the deafening silence left by Tasha. Over the past year, they have begun to heal, with the help of family, friends, and church. Each week, Camilla visits the Garden of Innocence, the children's section of the cemetery where Tasha's tiny body was laid to rest. She finds comfort with other grieving parents who share stories and support one another. The SIDS Alliance provided them with information to help them understand their daughter's death and the Lewis' have learned to cope with their loss. They have even begun to consider planning for another child. But no one will ever replace Tasha and they will never forget the pain of losing their sweet baby girl or the joy she brought them in those three short months.

Unfortunately, the Lewis' story is not a unique one. Thousands of families experience this horror each year as they struggle to understand why their apparently healthy infants fail to wake up. Doctors and researchers have yet to determine a cause for this deadly syndrome, nor have they found a cure.

In fact, SIDS is defined by what it is not. The definition provided by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development states that SIDS is "the sudden death of an infant under one year of age which remains unexplained after a thorough case investigation, including performance of a complete autopsy, examination of the death scene, and review of the clinical history" (Willinger, et al, 1991). SIDS is unexplained and unpredictable; it occurs silently and quickly, striking seemingly healthy infants.

Risk Factors

However, we can reduce the chances of SIDS. First of all, it's important to note what the risk factors are. While no cause for SIDS has been discovered, there are several factors which seem to contribute to the incidence of SIDS. The following characteristics have consistently been identified as independent risk factors, making these babies at greater risk for the incidence of SIDS:

- Babies who sleep on their stomach — **biggest risk factor**
- Babies who sleep with soft toys, fluffy blankets, or other soft items in the crib
- Babies who sleep on a soft surface
- Babies who are overheated
- Babies of younger mothers, under 20 at the birth of their first child
- Babies of mothers who smoke during or after pregnancy
- Babies who live in a household with smokers
- Babies of mothers with little or no prenatal care
- Babies born prematurely or with low birth weight
- Boy babies

Parent Alert!

SIDS: Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

The number one cause of death for infants between one month and one year old is SIDS, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, also known as “crib death.” Nearly 3,000 infants in the United States die of SIDS each year. There is no known cause, there are no warning signs, but there is something you can do to reduce the chances of your baby becoming a victim of SIDS.

1. Put your baby to sleep on his back.

Placing your baby on his back is the single most important thing you can do to reduce the risk of SIDS. Studies have shown that when babies sleep on their backs, it reduces the chances of dying of SIDS by as much as 50%. A baby sleeping on his back is not at a greater risk for choking or swallowing vomit.

2. No comforters, pillows, or stuffed animals in the crib.

Don't use fluffy blankets, comforters, sheepskins, or pillows. Let your baby sleep in a sleeper instead of using a lot of blankets. Keep the room temperature warm so it is comfortable for an adult. You don't want the baby to get overheated.

3. No smoking.

Smoking during and after pregnancy is dangerous for your baby. Mothers who smoke while pregnant are three times more likely to have a SIDS baby. Exposure to second-hand smoke doubles your baby's risk for SIDS. Don't let others smoke around your baby.

4. Put your baby on a firm, flat surface to sleep.

Always put your baby to sleep on a firm mattress or other firm surface. Don't let your baby sleep on waterbeds, comforters, or other fluffy surfaces.

5. Keep your baby's head uncovered during sleep.

Place your baby's feet at the bottom of the crib so that she can't scoot down under the blankets.

6. Tell others who care for your baby about SIDS.

Educate others about SIDS and ways to reduce the risk. Share this handout with grandparents, babysitters, and others who care for your child to make sure that wherever your baby sleeps she will sleep safely.

7. Get good health care.

Getting good prenatal care with regular check-ups; eating healthy foods; and staying away from drugs, alcohol, and smoking decreases your baby's risk for SIDS. Once your baby is born, make sure she gets regular well baby check-ups and is up to date on all immunizations.

8. Breast feed your baby.

Some studies show that SIDS is less common in breast-fed babies than in bottle-fed babies. This may be because breast milk provides protection against some infections that can trigger SIDS.

Changing Traditions and Behaviors

Through simple behavior changes, we can achieve incredible results, saving the lives of precious babies. **By putting babies to sleep on their backs, we can decrease the chances of SIDS.** It does not cost money to implement; it's not difficult; it causes no discomfort to the baby or inconvenience to the parent or caregiver. All we have to do is change the position of babies while sleeping, change our traditions of laying babies on their stomachs, and help our babies survive their first year of life.

It is widely believed in many communities that it is unsafe to put babies to sleep on their stomachs because of the danger of choking on spit-up or vomit. There is a tendency, as well, to over-bundle babies to insure that they are warm. Grandmothers are notorious for wrapping babies up to protect them from the cold and pass this habit down to their children, the new parents. Often as an expression of love, parents fill their babies' cribs with adorable stuffed animals to comfort them as they sleep. However, the truth of the matter is that all of these habits pose considerable danger to babies, putting them at risk for SIDS.

We must begin to change traditions and establish new rituals for our children's sake. **First, we must always put babies to sleep on their backs.** Place their feet at the bottom of the crib with a blanket no higher than the chest and tucked in around the crib mattress so that they cannot scoot down under the blankets. We can keep our babies warm by dressing them in sleepers and avoid using fluffy blankets, comforters, sheepskins, and pillows. Stuffed animals should be removed from the crib. This simple change in traditions could save a baby's life.

What You Can Do

As directors and/or child care providers, you are in a unique position to influence many more people and help to save even more lives. Here are some things you can do to educate caregivers, parents, and the extended family of the children you serve.

- **Conduct a workshop for caregivers.**
Educate caregivers about SIDS and the best ways to reduce the incidence. Discuss risk factors and the behavior changes that should occur in the center.
- **Introduce SIDS at a workshop for parents or at a regular parent meeting.** Invite a doctor or nurse who can relate to the parents to talk to them about SIDS and answer questions. A representative of the center should share with the parents steps they will take to prevent SIDS. Myths about sleeping on the back and keeping babies bundled should be addressed. Parents should be encouraged to invite grandparents and other family members or caregivers to attend.
- **Distribute educational materials for parents and extended family.** Multiple copies of handouts (like the Parent Alert on page 14) should be distributed to parents to share with extended family and other caregivers.
- **Have regular “baby checks.”** Identify one person in the center to conduct weekly “baby checks” at nap time to insure that all babies are on their backs and the sleep area is free of fluffy blankets, pillows, and toys.

Reference

Willinger, M., James, L. S., & Catz, C. (1991). Defining the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS): Deliberations of an expert panel convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. *Pediatric Pathology*, *11*, 677-684.