



Never shake a baby

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer

“Well, THAT’s obvious!”

But have you ever been faced with the inconsolable wails of a really crying baby?

There you are, holding the baby (could be your own, or maybe you are babysitting) and he is crying, as he has for the past hour. You have tried rocking, feeding, singing, dancing, ignoring, cuddling—the list is long—but still, that CRYING. There is frustration and anger building and suddenly...

Rather than finishing with the dreadful imagery that is coming, we would rather say that in so many cases of shaken baby syndrome (SBS), the pattern is pretty much as described. A tired and frustrated parent or caregiver finally snaps and shakes the baby. Hard. And the crying stops. Is this something that works? Or is it a sign of damage to an infant brain? Unfortunately, the damage makes it look like it has worked.

Shaken baby syndrome is a severe form of brain injury that occurs when a baby is forcefully shaken, causing the child’s head to rotate about uncontrollably because an infant’s neck muscles are not well developed. The violent movement pitches the brain back and forth within the skull. It ruptures blood vessels and nerves and tears brain tissue. The brain strikes the inside of the skull, causing bruising and bleeding to the brain.

Most incidents of SBS occur in infants who are younger than one year old, with the average age of victims between three and eight months. It is occasionally seen in children up to four years old. Among

victims, 20 to 30 percent die; 65-80% have neurological damage that affects their growth and development.

This is where recent research becomes especially interesting, and useful. It seems that babies all experience a ‘curve of crying’ that is consistent across cultures, even across some other mammals. While the amount of crying varies along a continuum, the curve is consistent. Crying is normal, but can vary between children, and even siblings. And all infants have periods of inconsolable crying.

Ronald Barr from UBC has researched infant crying and he posits that crying is a stimulus for shaking. He even shows that the crying curve is paralleled about two weeks later by an SBS curve. He devised a tool to help us understand babies’ crying: the period of **PURPLE** crying, an acronym that recognizes infants’ crying patterns.

The **Peak** of crying hits at about two months; it is **Unpredictable** and **Resistant** to soothing. The baby has a **Pain-like** expression on its face, even with no source of pain. There are **Long** bouts lasting 30 minutes or longer, and **Evening** crying is common.

A new campaign to help parents and caregivers understand that their baby’s crying is normal is getting under way. In addition to understanding **PURPLE**, we are reminded that when the time comes that frustration or anger is about to win out, the best thing to do is put the baby down and take a break. When you can’t take it, walk away.

And never shake a baby.

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