



## *When SIDS Occurs in a Child Care Setting*

## THE INVESTIGATION – WHAT TO EXPECT

Whenever there is an unexplained death, the law requires an investigation to find out the cause. Several people may ask you for the same information. The investigation may be hard for you and others close to the child.

The investigation serves three purposes. It helps determine the cause of death. It also helps us learn more about SIDS. And it may help you remember that **NO ONE IS TO BLAME FOR A SIDS DEATH.**

The investigators need your help. You may be asked to help in the following ways:

- **LAW ENFORCEMENT:** You may be asked about the baby's health, behavior, nap time and other observations you may have made. Photographs may be taken. They may ask you not to go into the area where the baby died.
- **LICENSING:** Licensing may ask questions similar to those asked by law enforcement. In addition, they will ask questions related to licensing regulations. A SIDS death is not cause for revoking a license.
- **CORONER:** A coroner's investigator may contact you with more questions about the circumstances of the death. An autopsy will be done. If you want the results, you can call the coroner's office.

## YOUR RESPONSE

Bonding occurs between the baby and the child care provider, therefore a SIDS death can cause feelings of grief much like those felt by the parents. Because providers essentially are an extension of the baby's family, the death is a wrenching and emotional event for them as well.

Feelings of anger, loneliness, sadness, guilt, and loss of confidence are common, frequent, and at times unbearable. Both providers and parents often are dismayed and exhausted by flashbacks, period of physical pain or illness, self-doubt, fear of caring for other infants, and depression. These feelings are normal, but it is important to note that if they last for an unusual length of time or are extremely severe, professional help may be needed.

The impact of a SIDS loss on the provider's family can also be tremendous. Family members may not be able to understand the depth of suffering because, in most cases, the child care provider is the only family member who was close to the baby and the parents.

## IMPACT OF SIDS

The provider may have difficulty talking to the baby's parents. Often, the provider was the last person to see the baby alive. The provider had to call the parents and explain that something was terribly wrong with their child. The provider is usually the one who hands over the baby's belongings to the grieving parents. The parents' emotions will vary. They may blame the provider for the baby's death but they also could feel guilty and sorry for the provider. When the diagnosis of SIDS is made, the parents and provider should try to accept that no one is to blame and that the death could not have been predicted or prevented. However, the questioning doesn't end with the diagnosis of SIDS. The wondering and grieving will continue.

## EXPLAINING SIDS TO CHILDREN

The other children in your care should be told about the death of the baby. By using the actual words, such as "dying" and "death," you will be teaching the children that this is a natural part of life, and they will not be confused over what has happened to the infant. Phrases such as "went away" or "went to sleep" often make children misunderstand death and lead them to become fearful of these events. Young children understand the literal meaning of the word. You can explain that the baby has died of SIDS and **NO ONE IS TO BLAME** because **WE DO NOT KNOW WHY IT OCCURS**. Reassure the children that SIDS only happens to babies.

Again, it is important not to use confusing phrases, such as "God wanted the baby," which lead a child to believe that God may want him or her next, or that God is no friend to babies.

Children react to death according to their age. Up to five years of age, children see death as magical and temporary. They believe that their own wishes have power. Sometimes siblings may feel that they are responsible for a death because they were wishing the baby away. They have trouble understanding exactly "where" the baby went when he/she died.

Younger children may cling to adults during a mourning period. Sadness may be portrayed through a decrease or unusual increase in activity, or by being overly quiet. You can help a child best by being open, honest and consistent in your behavior.

In helping children to understand and cope with death remember:

- Be loving
- Be accepting
- Be truthful
- Be consistent

## **TALKING TO THE OTHER PARENTS**

Parents of the other children need to be reassured and informed about SIDS. They should be told about the death as soon as possible following the event. The other parents should be provided with educational materials and, if desired, the opportunity to speak with healthcare professionals.

## **COPING AFTER THE DEATH**

The death of a baby in childcare could leave providers hesitant to subject themselves to the possibility of such intense pain in the future. Sometimes a childcare provider will feel so overcome with grief that they will leave the profession or prefer to care only for older children. Being informed about SIDS before it happens and receiving support after the death lessens the chances that a provider will leave the childcare profession permanently.

## **SUPPORT FOR YOU**

Both parents and providers need support for their grief. Both will experience a wide range of emotions and some traumatic days, weeks, and even months following a SIDS death. Attending a bereavement support group may be helpful or speaking with other childcare providers that have experienced a SIDS death.

For more information please contact the:  
**Northwest Infant Survival & SIDS Alliance**  
**206-548-9290 Seattle**  
**509-456-0505 Spokane**  
**1-800-533-0376 (WA/ID/OR)**  
**[www.nwsids.org](http://www.nwsids.org)**  
**[info@nwsids.org](mailto:info@nwsids.org)**

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