Working together to protect babies and toddlers

Babies and toddlers are more vulnerable to harm and abuse than any other age group. Much of this abuse can be prevented.

As part of FULL STOP, the NSPCC is campaigning for the protection of babies and toddlers and the support of families. Professionals in a range of disciplines have a key role to play in supporting parents, particularly at times of stress, so that they can avoid “crossing the line” when things get out of hand and their behaviour can become harmful. Working together, professionals can both prevent and identify harm to babies and toddlers.

Parents and carers of babies and toddlers who are under stress, are more likely to be in touch with the health service than any other agency. Midwives, health visitors, GPs, practice nurses, and staff in Accident and Emergency Departments are in a good position to help. Social workers, early years workers, childminders, and staff and volunteers in voluntary and community groups and programmes, including Sure Start, also provide important support.

Professionals have different levels of involvement with families. Some work in child protection, some support families, and some engage mainly with either the child or the parent. All professionals need to be aware of the paramount need to protect children and take action when they are at risk.

This leaflet describes ways in which professionals can provide support and advice to protect babies and toddlers. Key government guidance is contained in Working Together to Safeguard Children and The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families. Individual professional bodies also provide guidance.
Some facts

Most babies and toddlers are cared for and protected by loving parents. However, all parents can come under stress and a significant number of babies may be harmed as a result. Many of these injuries can be prevented.

- Almost two-thirds of child homicide victims are under the age of four years old.
- Under ones are the most at risk of all age groups, and are four times more likely to be killed than the average person.
- Shaking babies causes brain damage resulting in long-term disability and death. This brain damage has been detected in 1 in 4,000 infants.
- Under ones are statistically most at risk of abuse and neglect. At 31 March 2001, there were 4,200 registrations of babies under one year old on child protection registers. This is the highest rate for any age, three times the average for all ages, and is over 15 per cent of all registrations.
- In all, there were nearly 11,000 children under five years old on registers in England, around 900 in Wales, and 500 in Northern Ireland.
- Crying babies are particularly difficult to cope with and parents and carers may feel inadequate if they are unable to pacify them. The most common reason given for shaking a baby is that "it wouldn't stop crying".

- Post-natal depression is experienced by 12-15 per cent of mothers. It encompasses child birth mood disorders from "baby blues" to serious psychiatric illness.
- An NSPCC survey of 2,100 people who had recently had babies found 46 per cent of them did not feel they had enough support in times of stress. Of those who suffered, or whose partner suffered post-natal depression, 52 per cent felt they did not get enough extra support from health professionals.
- Support for new mothers is diminishing. The number of post-natal home visits by midwives and health visitors has declined by a quarter in the last decade.
- A survey of the mothers of one year olds found 75 per cent had already hit their children. Fourteen per cent of these incidents were classed as more than 'mild'.
- Although injuries sustained by infants are more likely to have fatal consequences, toddlers are just as likely to be injured by parents' actions.
- A 10 year study in the US found that over 10 per cent of injuries to under fives involved child abuse. Children whose injuries were non-accidental were usually younger, had more often received prior medical attention, and their injuries were more severe and dangerous.
Supporting parents is part of protecting children

Baby and toddlers are at an increased risk of harm when their parents or carers are experiencing or subjected to the risk factors that can lead to that harm. Some parents are unable to give the consistent nurturing that babies need.

Many parents who have a toddler also have a baby and managing their different and competing demands— including jealousy shown by the older sibling— can be difficult.

Parents of babies and toddlers with disabilities

Parents of babies and toddlers with disabilities may face questions, stresses, and difficulties additional to those of other parents and they may feel more isolated.

The damaging consequences of harm to babies and toddlers include:

- Death
- Brain damage
- Disability
- Injuries, including broken bones
- Poisoning
- Suffocation
- Delayed development
- Attachment problems which may lead to longer term emotional consequences
- Intellectual, social, and behavioural difficulties

Biting, spitting, and other forms of seemingly anti-social behaviour are all “normal.” But they can also be very stressful to parents.
While there is no reason why parents with a disability should not do as good a job as a parent as anyone else — and many disabled parents already do — their disabilities can make some aspects of looking after a baby or toddler more difficult. All families are unique and have different characteristics that may lead them to being more or less socially isolated or supported. Any family may need extra help and support at different times during the family life cycle.

Professionals can help by:
- recognising the risk factors that families are facing — while also recognising that families may be more or less able to cope with these;
- listening to and supporting parents;
- taking a child-focused approach;
- making appropriate referrals to other statutory and voluntary agencies;
- providing clear and consistent information to all parents on how babies and toddlers are harmed, and measures to promote their safety;
- following up parents who are not engaging with health services both ante- and post-natally. Home visits and extra telephone contact should be made;
- considering the commissioning and provision of health and home visiting services, parenting classes, and preventive services.

Risk factors to consider:
- Overwhelming social circumstances
- Impact of changing roles when becoming a parent
- Social isolation
- Poor parenting skills — including a lack of understanding of the child's needs and behaviour
- Weak attachment between parents/carers and their child
- Domestic violence
- Parent's low level of education
- Illness — experienced by the parent, baby or toddler
- Parent's bereavement
- Drug and alcohol addiction
- Non-attendance for routine ante-natal and post-natal services.

What can you do?

Non-accidental injury is the most common cause of cerebral haemorrhages

Professionals need to know:
Shaking causes bleeding in the brain; crying is the most common reason for shaking a baby. All children will suffer some accidental injuries, but any serious injury to a child, including
accidental injuries may suggest that the family needs advice or help to keep the child safe.

What professionals can do:
In assessing the risk to a baby you may need to question the degree of distress caused to the parent by the baby crying, or by caring for the baby's needs. Is the distress intolerable? Directly ask parents about how they cope with stress – this may enable you to discuss positive ways to deal with frustrations. When medical professionals see injuries in children, they should always consider whether the injuries were preventable, and whether the family might need help to prevent any injuries in the future.

Communicate to parents:
Never shake a baby – it is dangerous; babies cry because that is their way of communicating their needs such as hunger or discomfort. A parent responding to a baby's crying is demonstrating a nurturing and protective role.

Early intervention may stop the development of harmful patterns of behaviour within families

Any smacking of babies and toddlers can be damaging

Professionals need to know:
Severe injuries occur due to lack of self-control in responding to stress or administering "punishment" or discipline. Evidence of abuse may not always be present but it may manifest itself as: bruising; bite marks; other unexplained injuries. Any bruising in babies under one year old is indicative of severe abuse unless it can be attributed to another established diagnosis or cause. Toddlers are much more mobile than babies and may be bruised as a result of accidents – however, certain patterns of bruising and a child who is repeatedly bruised may indicate abuse.

What professionals can do:
Discuss the origins of injuries with parents and carers and check patterns of repeated injuries. If there is reason to suspect the child is at risk or has suffered significant harm, action needs to be taken to protect the child in accordance with inter-agency guidelines.
Communicate to parents:
Never hit or smack a child – it can be dangerous. Babies and toddlers are not sufficiently well developed to be deliberately “naughty” or know how to provoke you; any type of physical aggression against a baby or toddler is unacceptable.

Babies and toddlers are at risk in violent homes

Professionals need to know:
Domestic violence to mothers and abuse of babies and children often coincide. Where there are unexplained injuries to a baby or child, a medical examination should be sought.

What professionals can do:
Be aware of the possibility of wider domestic or family violence. Don’t be afraid to ask about the causes of injuries and record all observed injuries to both mothers and children. This may help with your professional assessment over time and they may be needed later in criminal proceedings. Always ask about safety and protection and familiarise yourself with local support agencies and child protection procedures.

Communicate to parents:
Take action now to protect yourself and your children – seek help and advice. Violence in the home may mean it is difficult to look after your children properly. Seeking help does not necessarily mean your children will be taken into care. Do not assume that your children are unaffected.

Remember to advise parents:
• Never shake or smack a baby or toddler.
• All parents can come under stress from time to time. You are not alone.
• Try to understand your baby’s or toddler’s needs and how they develop. That will help you respond appropriately to difficult behaviour.
• If you’re struggling, losing control, and in “danger of crossing the line” seek help before things get out of hand and your behaviour becomes harmful. You can always telephone the NSPCC Child Protection Helpline on 0808 800 5000.
• Babies are vulnerable when you’re vulnerable. Look after yourself.
• It is worth seeking help – support and advice are effective.