



A large number of child deaths are reported in South Africa each year. A lot of deaths relate to neglect, abuse or murder. Despite this, there's a knowledge gap in relation to understanding the issue. A pilot programme from the University of Cape Town's Children's Institute offers new information.

Children's Institute director, Professor Shanaaz Mathew led the first National Child Homicide Study. The study revealed that just under half (44 percent) of children were killed in the context of abuse. It also showed that not all cases were adequately investigated by the police [and] as a result many cases would fall through the cracks. In addition studies from developed settings showed us often child abuse deaths can be masked as natural deaths and it is only the overt injuries that get detected," she explained.

Babies are often shaken when they do not stop crying, this phenomenon is called Shaken baby syndrome (SBS). SBS may be defined as "the constellation of signs and symptoms resulting from violent shaking or shaking and impacting the head of an infant or small child." The alternative descriptive phrase "abusive head trauma" serves as an umbrella term implying injury to the skull, brain, and spinal cord as a result of shaking and/or trauma to the head. Implicit in any terminology is that an adult purposefully inflicts such trauma on the infant. Recent (international) literature cites the extraordinary statistic that 40% of childhood deaths as a consequence of child abuse involve children less than 12 months of age.

SBS can cause death, mental retardation or developmental delays, cerebral palsy, severe motor dysfunction, blindness, and/or seizures.

Research shows that shaking most often occurs in response to a baby crying that can trigger the person caring for the baby to become frustrated or angry.

The fact is that crying—including long bouts of inconsolable crying—is normal developmental behaviour in infants. The problem is not the crying, it's how caregivers respond to it. Picking up a baby and shaking, throwing, hitting, or hurting him or her is never an appropriate response. Most babies who cry a great deal are healthy and stop crying spontaneously. You are not a bad parent if your baby continues to cry after you have done all you can to calm him or her.

Remember, this will get better.

### **What to do if your baby is crying;**

- Check for signs of illness or discomfort like a dirty nappy, nappy rash, teething, fever, or tight clothing.

- Assess whether s/he is hungry or needs to be burped.
- Rub his/her back, gently rocking him/her; offer a pacifier; sing or talk; take a walk using a stroller or a take baby for a drive.
- Call the doctor if you think the child is sick.
- When you feel frustrated, angry, or stressed while caring for your baby, take a break. Put your baby in a crib on his or her back, make sure the baby is safe, and then walk away for a bit, checking on him or her every 5 to 10 minutes. Put the Angel Care monitor on and drink a cup of tea in the garden.
- Phone a friend or family member. Ask them to come and visit.
- Be aware of signs of frustration and anger in yourself and others caring for your baby.
- Remember, this will get better.

## Reference

- The Daily Maverick article by Greg Nicolson  
<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-07-13-analysis-the-gruesome-truth-about-child-deaths-in-south-africa/#.Vayjnfmqqko>