

Doll play and safe infant sleep

A guide for modelling safe infant sleep in early childhood education (ECE) settings

Background Story

Sharon Ayto is coordinator of the Child and Youth Mortality Review Committee for the Southern DHB. She was playing with children of those attending a safe sleep workshop at Awarua Social Services in Invercargill when she had an 'oh my goodness' moment.

Two children had covered dolls with blankets, in a pram, covering most of the dolls as well as the pram itself. Sharon showed them how to tuck the covers and keep 'baby's' face clear. The children followed her lead and then came back to check their 'babies'.

Sharon thought, 'What an untapped resource we have in our ECE children for extending the influence of safe sleep promotion.' This work has developed from the teaching-learning exchange between Sharon and these children.

Evidence

Research has identified risks for preventable infant death^{1,2} that define protection as: on the back, clear face, smokefree, own space, breastfed, carer near, immunised, gentle care. Of these 'on the back', 'clear face' and 'gentle care' best lend themselves to modelling through doll play in ECE settings.

Play

Play is the work of childhood. Through it children build social, emotional and cognitive strength. In pretend play they often practice being grown-ups. The role of the adult or teacher in modelling safe infant sleep within doll play is to support and extend children's play without interrupting, dominating or unnecessary intervention.

Modelling, or 'showing how', is a teaching-learning method requiring the adult to be mindful of language, values, attitudes as well as behaviours, because children imitate what they see, sense and hear. They bring their known experiences and lived realities to their play.

Place within Te Whariki Curriculum

Learning about safe infant sleep through doll play and modelling this to other children, at the centre and at home, is consistent with Strand 5: Exploration (Mana Aotūroa) of the Te Whariki Curriculum³ and links to the curriculum principles of Family and Community.

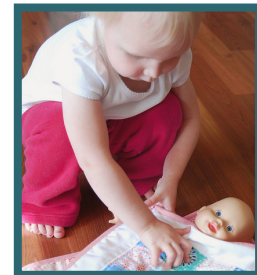
Goal 1 of Strand 5 is that children experience their play as valued learning. Valuing a child's contribution to the learning of others, be they little friends, family members or teachers, is a feature of the Te Whariki curriculum.



1. Covering face











2. Emptied cot, placed doll face-down then corrected



3. On back, clear face

Opportunities

Observing children during doll play will reveal to adults opportunities to support, extend or affirm their skills in relation to safe position of babies in the bed and bedding over babies. The table below identifies some play scenarios and suggested simple scripts to build a language around safe infant sleep within doll play.

Opportunity to extend skills	Infant Safety Principles - with suggested scripts -	Opportunity to affirm skills
	<p>On the back</p> <p>... so baby can breathe ... so baby can see ... 'cause that helps baby cool ... so baby is safe</p>	
	<p>Face clear</p> <p>... so baby can breathe ... so baby's face stays clear ... so baby is safe</p>	
	<p>Check for/remove hazards</p> <p>... no pillows for babies ... only baby in the bed ... take out the toys first ... pillows are for big children</p>	
	<p>Gentle care</p> <p>... gentle with her head ... we scoop her up ... always gentle with babies</p>	

Summary

The objective is for 'on the back' and 'clear face' to be normal in doll play and as children develop, then hazard checks and gentle care, too.

1. Mitchell, E. A., Freemantle, J., Young, J., & Byard, R. W. (2012). Scientific consensus forum to review the evidence underpinning the recommendations of the Australian SIDS and Kids Safe Sleeping Health Promotion Programme—October 2010. *Journal of paediatrics and child health*, 48(8), 626-633. [Link](#)
2. Moon, R. Y., & Hauck, F. R. (2015). Updating SIDS risk reduction advice has the potential to further reduce infant deaths in Sweden. *Acta Paediatrica*, 104(5), 434-435. [Link](#)
3. Nuttall, J. (Ed.). (2003). *Weaving Te Whariki: Aotearoa New Zealand's Early Childhood Curriculum Document in Theory and Practice*. NZCER. [Link](#)