

Babies, grandparents and safe sleep

The Christchurch organisation, Change for our Children, has held a contract with the Ministry of Health since 1994, for education about how to prevent sudden infant death. Grandparents are one part of the community who can help, as Stephanie Cowan, Director of the organisation, explains below.

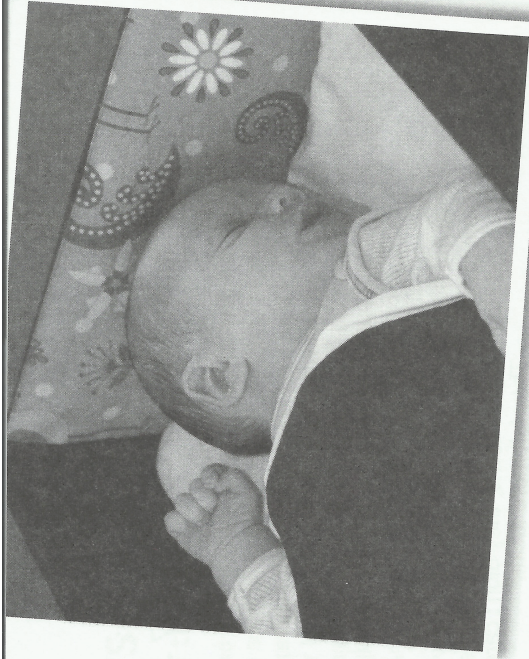
New Zealand is on a mission to end sudden infant death for good and grandparents who will help are key to this effort. We encourage you to campaign with us for safe sleep for every baby, every time and place they sleep, starting with your own families.

Times have changed: twenty-five or more years ago the western world was burdened with high cot death rates. You may have suffered a loss yourself, know people who did, or have cared for your babies in ways no longer promoted as safe. However, much has been learned in twenty-five years and most sudden infant deaths are now considered preventable. Safe sleeping conditions are the treatment.

Triple risk: Sudden infant death can occur at times of 'triple risk', because of first, the critical stage of development, second, the internal vulnerability of the baby and third, an external stressor in the sleep location. Together these three conditions of development, vulnerability and location set a baby up for safety or risk when they sleep. To protect babies at this time, they need to be on their back and close by (development), breastfed and smokefree (vulnerability), with clear face and own space (location) every time and place they sleep.

Position affects breathing. Young babies are not small versions of adults. They need to lie flat and on their backs to ensure their airways stay open. For the first six months or so, babies only breathe through their noses; they have large and heavy heads, short necks, loose jaws and large tongues. They can block off their own airways if they get into certain positions. Older babies can change position and need different sleep safety considerations. By their own actions, they can get covers over their heads, wedged into tight spots or tangled in bedding and may suffocate as a result.

Location affects safety. Fatal sleep accidents for babies can happen in a variety of places such as propped on pillows, slumped in car seats, face down on soft bedding, swaddled on the side, curled in slings, in the crooks of arms with their heads pushed forward, or with noses pressed into the backs of couches. These places may be different, but what is the same is how babies die; oxygen is blocked from reaching their lungs.



This can happen in any place that leads to a covered face, pinched nose, chin to chest position of the neck or tightness or pressure against a tiny chest. This is accidental suffocation and is a significant cause of many sudden infant deaths.

Strong babies

have more fight. No baby can escape the period of developmental risk to their airways, and there may be times they find themselves in challenging positions. However, smokefree and breastfed babies can better cope with suffocation challenges, and babies in their own space, but close by a caring adult, are more protected from such challenges should they arise. Smoke-exposed babies and bottle fed babies are particularly vulnerable due to a weakened drive to breathe, especially if they also share a bed with others.

Safer world for our babies now. Twenty-five years ago the total infant mortality rate for New Zealand babies was 10.95 per 1000 live births. Now it is less than half that. Statistics New Zealand reported a record low of 4.55 for the March 2012 year. Falling death rates give confidence that the safe sleep principles currently promoted to new parents save babies' lives. We encourage grandparents to help strengthen understanding and support for safe sleep for babies in practical ways e.g.

- Speak up for babies anywhere that their safety may be challenged by sleeping: on the side or front, near pillows or anything soft, with loose bedding, overbundled or swaddled past a time when they can roll, or sleeping in a place distant from caregivers.
- Have a safe sleeping space ready in your home for babies who visit.
- Join our network of Grandparent Champions of safe sleep in your settings and train up with us at Change for our Children. (Contact Sharon on Sharon@changeforourchildren.co.nz)