Shaking a Baby Will Silence It—For Good

he case of the British nanny accused of shaking a young child to death had people across the United States glued to their television sets. Photographs of the beautiful 8-month-old broke hearts all over the world and brought international attention to an often-fatal form of child abuse.

While children are more likely to die from neglect than any other type of abuse, the head trauma associated with violently shaking a child is the leading cause of death for children who have been physically abused, according to the Louisiana Council on Child Abuse.

The Massachusetts case seemed to serve as a catalyst for a closer examination of shaken baby syndrome, but Acadiana residents soon realized it was not an isolated incident. In the few months since Louise Woodward’s conviction for second-degree murder and the judge’s subsequent reduction of the conviction to manslaughter, several shaken baby cases have emerged in Acadiana.

- In October, 63-year-old Julia Kray was indicted by a grand jury on a charge of cruelty to a juvenile for allegedly shaking a 5-month-old in November 1996. The child, who had stopped breathing while in her care and also suffered a seizure, was diagnosed with shaken baby syndrome. Kray, a trained nurse in her native country of Colombia, has pleaded not guilty. The trial is set for May 11. If convicted, she faces up to 10 years in prison. The child’s parents, Luis and Kim Betances, also have filed a civil suit against Kray. The child appears to be making a full recovery.

- On Nov. 10 Juliane Williams, who had no permanent address at the time of her arrest by Lafayette City Police, was arrested in connection with the death of her infant son. An autopsy determined the cause of death to be shaken baby syndrome. On Dec. 11 a judge found probable cause for her to be charged

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Knowledge about what is now called SBS or shaken infant syndrome is continuing to develop. Parents of babies prone to sleep apnea were once advised to shake the infant when it stopped breathing, but educational materials now tell parents not to shake a baby for any reason.

Shaking a baby is almost always an act of frustration, says Dr. Bryan Sibley, a Lafayette pediatrician. “It’s usually frus-

and had been left in the care of Hebert on at least two occasions. On one occasion, the child sustained a broken leg, and medical help was not sought. A second injury left him with brain injuries consistent with shaken baby syndrome. The child has permanent brain damage and is now blind and deaf. Hebert was sentenced to eight years at hard labor, and Stakes, who pleaded no contest, had her seven-year-sentence suspended and was given three years of active probation.

Just last week another case of a 2-year-old who had serious head injuries led to the arrest of the child’s mother in Lafayette. Again, police told local media that doctors say the child’s injuries are the result of shaken baby syndrome. Also last week the body of a 3-month-old infant, whose cause of death had previously been undetermined, was exhumed in Evangeline Parish, and an autopsy revealed that the most likely cause of death was shaking.

hat most people don’t quite understand is that the perpetrators of shaken baby syndrome typically don’t intend to harm the child and aren’t necessarily guilty of other forms of abuse. Studies have suggested that as much as 40 to 50 percent of people surveyed do not know that shaking babies is dangerous.

While today’s lifestyle—working parents leading fast-paced, stressful lives—may be more conducive to such an act of frustration, this type of abuse is nothing new. The term “Whiplash Shaken Baby Syndrome” was coined in 1972, but experts believe this type of trauma has been inflicted on children for decades and possibly centuries.
First, Do No Harm

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ometimes, the simplest measures do help a crying baby. Several organizations, including the Louisiana Council on Child Abuse and the SBS Prevention Plus program, offer the following:

- Check whether the baby is wet or hungry
- Feed the baby slowly and burp often
- Run a vacuum cleaner within hearing range of the baby
- Offer the baby a pacifier
- Put the baby in a safe carrier on top of the clothes dryer (never leave unattended)
- Take the baby for a ride in a stroller or car or put him in a baby swing
- Hold the infant gently and close to your body and walk or rock him
- If you breastfeed, avoid eating onions or beans or drinking coffee, tea or cola

These organizations also advise against holding a baby if you feel angry. Make sure the baby is safe, and leave the room to calm down. A frustrated parent can call the Louisiana Council on Child Abuse’s Helpline at 1-800-348-KIDS for information or counseling. Counselors are available from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day. You may also call Childhelp USA at 1-800-4-A-Child.

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Heavy heads and weak neck muscles make babies especially susceptible to shaking-related injuries, says neurosurgeon Patrick Juneau.

Unfortunately, immediate treatment isn’t always available,” Sibley says. Sometimes, it takes a while for problems associated with the injuries to surface, he explains.

Computerized tomography scanning and magnetic resonance imaging, commonly known as a CT and MRI, respectively, also have improved physicians’ ability to properly diagnose the problem, says Sibley. In fact, Sibley says a CT scan is routinely done on anyone who comes to the emergency room as the result of a seizure or who has stopped breathing. Still, because CT scans are expensive, they often are not performed for some problems and the bleeding in the brain goes undetected.

Treatment of SBS is usually very expensive, and sometimes continues throughout the child’s life. Surgery may be required to remove the blood clot, and pressure on the brain also can be treated by hooking the patient up to a ventilator. According to Juneau, medications like Lasix and those which contain mannitol are sometimes administered to decrease swelling.

If the patient has slipped into a coma, a fiber optic monitor may be inserted into the surface of the brain tissue for a numerical reading of the brain pressure, which helps doctors determine the best treatments. “That monitor will detect if the brain pressures are rising,” Juneau says.

Other injuries sometimes occurring as a result of the violent handling and shaking of an infant are rib fractures, limb fractures and grasp bruises around the ribs, neck or head. The Betanceses’ child, who was 5 months old at the time he was injured, also suffered a fractured leg.
People who violently shake babies can't tolerate their inability to control the infant's cries, and may even believe the baby is purposely crying to get attention or be annoying, according to a recent Newsweek column by Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint and Susan Linn. Others believe the sustained crying is a sign that the baby is spoiled, and they think he needs to be physically disciplined. "A vicious cycle begins when the caretaker becomes ever more exasperated and angry and shakes the baby in a misguided effort to stop the crying," writes Poussaint, who is director of the media center of the Judge Baker Children's Center and clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard, and Linn, associate director of the center.

And while crying most often causes the frustration, acts as insignificant as bed wetting, spilling juice or painting a wall with a Marks-A-Lot have been known to trigger a violent shaking. A 29-year-old California man shook his girlfriend's toddler to death because the boy blocked his view of a football game on TV. Yet another father admitted to authorities that he went into a rage when his favorite sports team lost and shook his 6-week-old son in frustration.

he baby's head is pretty fragile," says Dr. Patrick Juneau, a Lafayette neurosurgeon. "It doesn't take much. Anything that causes pressure in the brain is going to be dangerous." Juneau says. Because they have a heavy head—some 15 percent of their body weight—and weak neck muscles, babies are particularly at risk. Also, the protec-

tive tissue that surrounds the exception-
ally fragile brain is not fully developed. Vigorous shaking produces an acceler-
ation and deceleration of the head, which babies can't resist as well as adults, Juneau says.

Signs that a child may be suffering from this type of abuse include irritability, decreased appetite or feeding problems, poor sucking or swallowing, difficulty breathing, vomiting, lethargy, and inability to follow movements.

Infants who do survive often suffer a range of problems, including brain dam-
age, partial or total blindness, hearing loss, speech difficulty, paralysis, mental retarda-
tion, cerebral palsy and seizures. Medical experts now believe that some children who have experienced learning difficulty and may have entered special education classes over the years were actually undi-
agnosed SBS victims.

In the past, and to some extent today, the problem goes undetected because of a lack of external injuries. Also, according to the California Medical Association, for many years doctors failed to recognize the cause of brain bleeding in small children because the children did not have any external signs of injury. And in fact, some physicians are still unfamiliar with the signs of SBS. "The big ones are seizures and not breathing —those occur as a result of bleed-
ing inside the skull and around the brain, and swelling of the brain," Sibley says.

Additionally, some of the symptoms of SBS, like vomiting and poor feeding, are consistent with a viral illness, like the flu, or even colic and teething. Almost 70 per-
cent of misdiagnosed SBS victims suffer from complications that could have been prevened with early detection.

Additionally, even some of the more severe SBS symptoms are consistent with other conditions, Sibley says. "There are probably 20 things you'd think about that would cause a seizure," he says.

Shaking a baby causes the brain to liter-
ally rattle inside the skull. Massive swelling cuts off the flow of oxygen, and can cause vital functions to shut down. There are usually signs of a subdural hematoma, which is a blood clot over the surface of the brain, or there can be hemorrhaging inside of the brain itself. Another tell-tale

Assistant District Attorney Danny
Landry is prosecuting one of Lafayette's
most high-profile shaken baby cases.
Whether SBS is on the rise nationally or medical professionals are just more in tune to the problem is unclear. Some health care professionals say SBS has not been adequately studied to determine whether it is a growing problem. Ironically, it took the tragic circumstances of Matthew Eappen's death to bring widespread awareness to this type of child abuse.

As with other forms of child abuse, the burden for detecting and reporting shaken baby syndrome inevitably falls to health care professionals. David Frugé, an emergency room nurse at Doctors' Hospital in Opelousas, says he has personally witnessed an evolution of awareness of child abuse, including SBS. "We are always on the alert," he says. "We are more aware of child abuse than we have been in the past."

Frugé says health care professionals ask lots of questions and look for aspects of the story that don't seem to add up. "It all boils down to history. You pursue the history," he says.

A suspicious doctor should examine the child for other signs of abuse, Juneau says, even if it means ordering X-rays to look for previous fractures, he says.

Because of the heightened awareness of child abuse and SBS, health care professionals believe child abuse is rarely missed despite past difficulties in distinguishing SBS from other possible illnesses. But Juneau says a number of parents do take offense to the line of questioning. "That's the only counter to it," he says. "It can be offensive to people."

Assistant District Attorney Danny Landry, who is prosecuting Julia Kray, says he is pleased with the amount of medical literature he has located on SBS. "I've basically managed to gather volumes of research on this," he says.

Landry knows his case is very dependent on scientific evidence and medical testimony, and while the medical community can determine that SBS did occur, it certainly cannot establish at whose hands. There are often no witnesses to the abuse, which presents an additional complication for prosecutors.

"It's a hard one," says Ed Marquet, Kray's defense attorney. "It's a hard situation to think anyone would harm a baby, but apparently it happened."

Marquet will point to Anthony's own parents as the responsible party. "Statistically, it's usually the parents. Statistically, it's the male parent," Marquet says.

"I think this one will go to trial," Marquet says. "This is her whole life."

Landry and Marquet will square off in what is likely the most high-profile shaken baby case to date in Lafayette. Marquet is expected to call KLFY-TV10 meteorologist Rob Perillo and his wife, whose child Kray cares for, as character witnesses for Kray.

Landry hopes the issue gets the public's attention. "A lot of people don't really understand how fragile children under 2 are. This is the kind of information people need to know about," Landry says.