HSCB Safe Sleeping Campaign: Position statement

The Safe Sleeping campaign is being launched by the Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Board (HSCB).

Purpose of the campaign is to:

- raise public awareness of the risks of co-sleeping and associated factors
- enable practitioners to give appropriate information and advice to parents to help them make an informed choice about safe sleeping arrangements for their babies and infants.

Key message
The safest place for your baby to sleep is in a cot, crib or moses basket. Although it is recognised that sharing a bed with your baby may support breastfeeding, please ensure you put your baby back in its cot/crib after feeding. DO NOT share a bed with your baby if you or your partner are smokers, have recently drunk alcohol, or have taken medication or drugs which make you sleep heavily. The risks associated with bed-sharing are increased if your baby was born prematurely (before 37 weeks) and/or was of a low birth weight (below 2.5kg/5lb 8oz).

Background
Nationally over 300 infants a year die suddenly and unexpectedly. There is evidence from many long term studies of sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI) that some of the infant deaths associated with bed-sharing, co-sleeping and other risk factors could have been avoided. Recent research also shows that breastfeeding your baby can reduce the risk of SUDI by one third.

In Hertfordshire in the last six months three babies have died from sudden unexpected death in infancy associated with co-sleeping in a bed or on a sofa with the added risk factors of parental smoking or drinking. It may have been possible to have prevented the deaths of these babies.

National evidence also shows that, for a number of babies, they died when sleeping with a parent on the sofa or armchair. Research conducted by Dr Peter Fleming* found that where a parent falls asleep with their infant on a sofa or armchair, the risk of sudden infant death is increased 50 times.

In response to this, the Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Board has developed a campaign to raise public and professional awareness and reinforce the confidence and training of practitioners who come into contact with infants, their parents or other carers. This will help support practitioners in giving evidence based advice to parents and carers to improve the safety of their child.

Campaign
It is recognised that parents will take infants into bed and share sofas with them to comfort them, feed them and promote bonding and that there are factors which influence sleeping

April 2012

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arrangements including a combination of parental values, socio-economic factors and cultural diversity. This campaign does not discourage this but promotes alongside this that: **the safest place for your baby to sleep is on their back in a cot, crib or moses basket and in a room with you for the first six months (Department of Health).**

This is because there is a risk that parents/carers may roll over in their sleep and suffocate the baby, or that the baby could get caught between the wall and the bed, or could roll out of bed and be injured.

**Parents/carers should not share a bed with their baby especially if they:**

- are smokers (no matter where or when they smoke) and especially if the mother smoked during pregnancy
- have been drinking alcohol
- have taken medication or drugs that may make them sleep more heavily, including non-prescription or illegal substances such as cannabis
- have had an anaesthetic, such as after day surgery
- have any illness (physical or mental) or condition (for example epilepsy) that affects their awareness of the baby
- feel very tired or if they or their partner is unusually tired, to the point where they would find it difficult to respond to the baby, for example, if they have had less than four hours sleep in the last twenty four hours
- feel unwell.

**Parents/carers should not share a bed with their baby if:**

- their baby was premature (born before 37 weeks), or was of low birth weight (less than 2.5kg or 5.8lb)
- the baby has a high temperature, in which case medical advice should be sought; that is if the baby has a temperature of 38°C or above, if he or she is less than three months; or 39°C or above if three to six months old.

Very importantly:
- parents/carers should be advised never to sleep with a baby/infant on a sofa or armchair.

There is no advice which guarantees prevention of sudden unexpected deaths, but the risks can be reduced considerably if this advice is followed.

The aim of this campaign is to reduce the number of infant deaths associated with co-sleeping and the associated risk factors.

The campaign will support this by:

- providing guidance to professionals on what a safe sleeping environment for parents and babies looks like using current national and international evidence
- increasing workers’ knowledge and understanding of the risk factors and the rationale
- increasing parents’ knowledge and understanding of the risks associated with intentional or unintentional co-sleeping and bed-sharing
• promoting consistent information and advice across all organisations for parents on co-sleeping and bed-sharing with their infant
• supporting workers in all organisations to contribute to promoting the message.

Protective factors:
• reducing or quitting smoking in pregnancy reduces the risk of SUDI
• putting a baby to sleep on its back carries the lowest risk of SUDI
• room sharing (sleeping in parents’ bedroom) lowers the risk
• breastfeeding protects against SUDI
• settling a baby to sleep with a dummy can reduce the risk of cot death, providing this is done consistently every time the baby is put down to sleep (breastfed babies should not be given a dummy until breastfeeding is established i.e. not before they are one month old).

Definitions for professionals
For the purpose of the campaign guidance the following definitions apply:
• bed-sharing: describes babies sharing a parent’s bed in hospital or home, this may be a practice that occurs on a regular basis or it may happen occasionally
• co-sleeping: describes any one or more person falling asleep with a baby in any environment (e.g. sofa, bed or sleep surface, any time of day etc); this may be a practice that occurs on a regular basis or it may happen occasionally; may be intentional or unintentional
• parent/carer: this represents anyone caring for an infant; this includes mothers, fathers, grandparents, foster carers or any other family member or friend who provides care for an infant
• infant: a child up to the age of 12 months
• overlay: describes rolling onto an infant and smothering them, for example in bed or on a chair, sofa or beanbag.

Our thanks to Bolton, Salford and Wigan Safeguarding Children Boards and the Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths (FSID) for their contribution of material and information.

*Dr Peter Fleming is professor of infant health and developmental physiology at Bristol University. His paper was published in the British medical journal