



Kansas Infant Death and SIDS Network

SIDS and Its Effect on Caregivers

Written by Sharon Russell. Reprinted with permission from
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I am a family home provider who has cared for infants and children for 18 years. It is my profession. I find it very satisfying and fulfilling. But, in August 1984, something happened that turned my whole world upside down and me inside out.

I had a sudden infant death occur in my home.

As a childcare provider and a mother, I never imagined something like that could happen to me. The tragedy made me question my natural instincts as a childcare provider.

I'm telling my story because, given the number of babies we providers care for, I want to warn caregivers of the emotional turmoil they will endure and to point out that the bonding between caregiver and child produces, in the caregiver, feelings of grief similar to those a parent experiences when such a tragedy occurs.

On the day it happened, nothing was out of the ordinary. I was caring for two babies in my bedroom. One of them was a two-month-old baby boy whom I had just started caring for.

I had given him his bottle and put him down for a nap, checking on him periodically while he was sleeping. Everything seemed fine. As it was getting close to lunch, I picked up the other baby and fed him. Finishing that, I returned to the two-month-old infant.

Immediately, I knew something was terribly wrong. He was lying face down on the comforter. My first thought was that he had suffocated.

I called the paramedics and began CPR. They arrived minutes later, though it seemed like hours, and rushed the child to the hospital. Not knowing if the baby was alive or dead, I notified the parents who left immediately for the emergency room.

Two hours later I got the bad news. The coroner called to tell me the child had died from SIDS.

Mentally, intellectually I knew what he was actually telling me, that I had done everything in my power to help this child, that the death was unpreventable. But the initial shock, that is, finding the baby motionless in the bed and thinking that he had suffocated, affected me very deeply on an emotional level.

I went through all the necessary steps. I called my licensing worker, who came out to make his report. He was very sympathetic and comforting. The following day I called my insurance company, and they, too, tried to reassure me by telling me there wasn't a liability problem because SIDS is a natural death.

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Still, I could not help but feel that I had somehow failed in caring for the child who had been entrusted to me, so I began to question my natural child rearing instincts. I lost trust in my ability to care for babies, that everything would be okay with the children under my care.

For a while I would not even take care of infants. And, when I did finally take another baby, I found myself constantly checking and rechecking her breathing. There were even times when I had to physically touch her because I felt I could not trust my own eyes.

For many months I thought I would see another death scene each time I entered the room. I became so overly protective of all my children that, by the end of my workday, I was totally exhausted. On top of that, I had trouble sleeping through the night. I could not concentrate enough to do finances or even read a book.

Many things began bothering me that would not have before, and even my marriage was affected. As those months passed, I searched through magazines looking for reasons, explanations, or even first-person accounts from people who had gone through what I was experiencing. There were none.

I went to a parents' meeting for SIDS, but I did not feel comfortable because I was with the parents of children who had died of SIDS. There were no other childcare providers present, so I felt like an outsider who was intruding on a group session for grieving parents.

It took a counseling session with a very caring registered nurse for me to understand that my reactions were completely normal feelings "for a parent who had just lost a child".

Although many would think, because we are not the parents - but just the caregivers, we do not develop such a bonding with our children, the fact is there is a strong emotional bond that develops between child and caregiver. And, while there is a support system for parents, it doesn't necessarily meet the needs of the caregiver. Perhaps that's because the public hasn't realized, in the end, what we are doing as loving caregivers is renting out our emotional psyches.

With the growing number of infants being cared for by licensed providers and with the high infant mortality rate attributable to SIDS, we need more and better information, not just about SIDS, but also about what happens to childcare providers emotionally and personally when something like this happens.

It was extremely beneficial for me when I was able to find and talk to other childcare providers who had a similar experience, for they understood exactly what I was going through.

As I said, I have continued to provide care for infants, including the subsequent sibling of the two-month-old. And, once again, I find it to be highly rewarding. Things really do get better with time passing. The pain does ease, and life does become much brighter.

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