



CONVERSATIONS IN CARE

A Practical Guide for CHWs and Care Teams Rooted in Trust and Respect

Safe Sleep Practices

Why It Matters

Creating a safe sleep environment helps protect babies from sudden unexpected infant death (SUID), including sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Families can take simple steps to reduce risks while promoting healthy sleep.

This conversation guide aims to support providers in delivering information with compassion, creating a safe and respectful environment, and connecting families to the resources and support they need as they begin to navigate their journey.



Before the conversation

- Create a safe, respectful environment.
- Ask about what the family already knows or believes.
- Acknowledge that some words, beliefs, or traditions may be different, and that it is okay.
- At first, listen more than speak.



Questions

Answers

What is SIDS?

SIDS stands for sudden infant death syndrome. It is the sudden, unexplained death of a baby under 1 year old, usually during sleep.



Tip: Place your baby on their back to sleep every time and use a firm, flat sleep surface without soft bedding, pillows, or toys.

What is SUID?

SUID stands for sudden unexpected infant death. It is a broad term that includes any sudden and unexpected death of a baby under 1 year old, whether the cause is known or unknown.



Tip: Keep the baby's sleep area safe by avoiding bed-sharing, keep the crib free of blankets or stuffed animals, and make sure the baby sleeps in a smoke-free environment.

How are SIDS and SUID different?

Think of SUID as the umbrella term for all unexpected infant deaths. SIDS is one type of SUID where the cause remains unexplained after investigation.



Tip: Use safe sleep practices every sleep, every time. Even babies who seem healthy are at risk if unsafe sleep environments are used.

What is a safe sleep environment?

A safe sleep environment is a place where the baby sleeps on their back, in a flat, firm crib or bassinet, with no soft bedding, toys, or pillows. It reduces the risk of SIDS and other sleep-related accidents.



Tip: Explain that safe sleep is about reducing risk. Emphasize that safe sleep applies to every sleep time: naps, nighttime, and supervised sleep.



Questions

Answers

Why is it important for babies to sleep on their backs?

Babies who sleep on their backs have a much lower risk of SIDS. Even if a baby rolls over on their own, it's safest to always put them down on their back at the start of sleep.



Tip: Reassure families that babies are strong and can move, but placing them on their back is the safest starting position. Show that tummy time when awake is good for development, but sleep should always be on the back.

What should go in the crib or bassinet?

Only a **firm mattress with a fitted sheet** should be in the crib.

Remove: pillows, blankets or quilts, stuffed animals or toys, bumpers or crib wedges.



Tip: Explain that 'empty is safe.' Offer alternatives for warmth, like wearable blankets (sleep sacks) instead of loose blankets.

Where should the baby sleep?

The safest place is in the **parents' room but on a separate sleep surface**, like a bassinet or crib, for at least the first 12 months.

Room-sharing makes it easier to feed, comfort, and monitor the baby.



Tip: Respect cultural practices; discuss ways to reduce risk if families have different practices. Encourage placing the baby on their back in a firm, flat area without soft bedding.



Questions

Answers

Are swaddles safe for my baby?

- Swaddling can be safe for young babies if done correctly, but:
- Always place the baby on their back.
 - Stop swaddling once the baby shows signs of rolling over.
 - Keep the swaddle snug, but not too tight, around the hips and chest.



Tip: Demonstrate proper swaddling or share resources/videos. Remind families to check the baby's temperature and not to overheat.

What about the baby's temperature? Can they get too hot or cold?

- Yes, overheating or being too cold can increase the risk of SIDS.
- **Safe temperature:** Keep the room comfortably cool (around 68–72°F / 20–22°C).
 - **Clothing:** Dress the baby in light layers or a sleep sack; avoid blankets.
 - **Check signs:** If the baby's chest or neck feels sweaty, red, or too warm, remove a layer. If hands or feet are cold, the core temperature is usually okay; add a light layer, if needed.

ROOM TEMP	WHAT TO WEAR	SLEEP SACK WEIGHT
75–77 F (24–25 C)	 	 0.5 TOG
69–74 F (20–23 C)	 	 1.0 TOG
64–68 F (18–19 C)	 	 2–2.5 TOG



Tip: Encourage families to feel the baby's chest or neck rather than hands or feet to check warmth. Remind families that overheating is a risk like soft bedding or unsafe surfaces.



Questions

Answers

Can my baby sleep in a car seat, swing, or bouncer?

Babies should sleep in a flat, firm sleep surface, not in car seats, swings, or inclined chairs. These surfaces can increase the risk of suffocation or airway blockage.



Tip: Explain that short naps while traveling are okay, but, at home, always transfer the baby to a safe sleep surface.

What about pacifiers?

Using a pacifier at nap time and bedtime may reduce the risk of SIDS. If breastfeeding, wait until breastfeeding is well-established (usually three to four weeks).



Tip: Emphasize that pacifiers are optional and helpful. Teach families to keep the pacifier clean and not attach it to cords or stuffed animals.

What are other dangers beyond the crib?

- **Secondhand smoke:** Babies exposed to smoke have higher risk of SIDS. Encourage smoke-free environments.
- **Caregivers under the influence:** Never use drugs or alcohol when caring for your infant, and be aware that some over-the-counter medication may cause drowsiness.
- **Caregiver exhaustion:** Accidentally falling asleep while holding the baby increases risk. Use a safe sleep surface instead.
- **Unsafe surfaces:** Recliners, couches, or adult beds are unsafe for unattended baby sleep. Babies can become trapped or suffocate.



Tip: Frame these risks in a nonjudgmental, supportive way: “We want to make sure both you and the baby sleep safely.” Encourage families to plan safe alternatives if they are tired or using substances.

Note: These questions and responses were gathered from community members and developed with their voices and cultural insight. For more information or resources, visit MCD’s Strengthening Patient Care webpage: mcd.org/technical-assistance-training/strengthening-patient-care