

## News & Observer | newsobserver.com | Maternity wards to coach parents: Don't shake baby

---

# Shaken Silent

---

Published: Jan 16, 2008 12:30 AM

Modified: Jan 16, 2008 02:43 AM

### Maternity wards to coach parents: Don't shake baby

**MANDY LOCKE, Staff Writer**

RALEIGH - Babies cry. It's normal. If you think you might lose your cool, put the baby in a crib and walk away.

That message soon will be drilled into parents before they check their newborns out of maternity wards across the state, in hopes that it will temper the urge to shake a wailing baby.

In the most extensive program of its kind, child abuse experts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University will track whether the advice helps reduce the number of babies violently shaken. An estimated 2,000 children under 2 are shaken by their caregivers in North Carolina each year, according to a recent survey of parents.

Over the next five years, doctors and researchers expect parents of the 125,000 babies born each year in the state to be coached about the hazards of shaking a baby.

"If you walk away from a baby, they're safer than being shaken," said Desmond Runyan, a professor of social medicine and pediatrics at UNC-CH and principal investigator for the project. "That's what we need parents to hear."

About 40 North Carolina children a year end up in a pediatric intensive care unit after being shaken. A quarter typically die. About 27 are debilitated, suffering long-term illnesses such as cerebral palsy, mental retardation and chronic seizures. Some are rendered blind. Others are forced to eat through tubes.

Many shaken babies never reach adulthood, dying years after the abuse.

Jennifer Dickens isn't quite sure what's in store for her son Christopher Daughtrey. In 2006, at the age of 7 weeks, Christopher was violently shaken.

He survived, but doctors warn Dickens they won't know the full extent of his brain damage until Christopher reaches kindergarten. The part of his brain debilitated by the shaking puts him in danger of being aggressive and having behavioral issues. His muscles are weak, and he lacks coordination, Dickens said. She hopes constant sessions of physical therapy will help.

"What did he do to cause this?" Dickens, from Bertie County in the northeastern part of the state, asked a crowded news conference Tuesday. "He only cried."

The person who shook Christopher is facing criminal charges. Dickens declined to name him or say more about it because the case is pending.

She said, though, that the person who shook her son was not violent, and she never worried about leaving her son with him. Still, she's left with the damage.

"It just takes a few seconds of anger and frustration to ruin a child's life," Dickens said. "I'll always wonder what more he could have been."

Researchers have found that infants are at most risk of being shaken during the period in their development in which they are most apt to cry for long spells. That period arrives between 2 and 3

months of age, when a baby can cry for hours on end for no particular reason. The crying spells typically taper after that age.

As part of the project, nurses will counsel parents about a baby's crying patterns and coach them about ways to cope. They also will provide them with a video to watch that they will encourage them to share with others caring for the child.

Researchers at UNC's Injury Prevention Research Center will track the incidents of shaken baby syndrome in the state to determine if the campaign is effective.

**[mandy.locke@newsobserver.com](mailto:mandy.locke@newsobserver.com) or (919) 829-8927**

© Copyright 2008, The News & Observer Publishing Company

A subsidiary of [The McClatchy Company](#)