

Insights

The Photo of My Baby That Almost Killed Us



Cindy Hutter, MBA: Director of Marketing and Digital Strategy, NICHQ

I almost died last week. (OK, maybe that is a little dramatic.)

I was at work, responding to emails when I saw the notification light on my cell phone. Like a Pavlovian dog, I quickly swiped my password, tapped the alert and the email with the picture popped open. As much as I hate the idea of my daycare provider taking photos of my kids all day, I love getting a glimpse into their daily activities. But, I wasn't ready for the photo I got. My son was sleeping in a crib with a loose fitted sheet and he was on his side with his cheek and mouth buried in the sheet. Gasp!!!

Working at NICHQ, and on a project [dedicated to reducing infant mortality](#)—including sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) related to poor safe sleep guideline adherence—I knew the picture was all wrong. The sheet **should** fit snugly. My son **should** be on his back. The first thought that went through my head was my baby could be dead. I rationalized that with the time stamp on the photo being an hour prior that they would have called already if he was really dead, right? All I wanted to do was cry.

I've heard the stories of babies dying at daycare centers when not put to sleep on their backs.

And not just from clickbait stories on Facebook. One of my colleagues knows someone this happened to. I couldn't even imagine how horrible that must be; sadly, too many parents don't have to imagine.

SIDS and sleep-related sudden unexpected infant death (SUID) are [leading causes](#) of infant mortality in the U.S. It's no surprise given the number of advertisements of cribs that do not adhere to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [safe sleep guidelines](#). A [recent study](#) published in the journal Pediatrics shows that only half of nearly 1,800 retail crib displays from nationwide retailers that were reviewed adhered to the AAP guidelines. The most common reasons for nonadherence were the use of bumper pads and loose bedding. Go head, flip through a Babies"R"Us, Buy Buy Baby, Target or Walmart advertisement and see for yourself. If the cribs were just cribs with a tight-fitted sheet like infants need, they certainly wouldn't look as appealing to the buyer, and the seller would be stuck with all those bumper and blanket sets.

Perhaps most striking from the study, is that, just like with infant mortality rates, magazine advertising portraying safe sleep environments revealed racial and ethnic disparities. According to the Pediatrics study, "[among] advertisements in which the race of the child could be determined, the adherent sleep environments only featured white children. In contrast, nonwhite children were depicted in 18.5 percent of advertisements, all showing unsafe sleep environments. The lack of guideline-adherent sleep environments in advertising depicting minority children is alarming considering that infants of non-Hispanic, African-American mothers had more than double the rate of death by SIDS/SUID when compared with all race mortality."

While SIDS is a leading cause of infant mortality, it is also one of the most preventable. Even though much work is being done to educate parents in hospitals before discharge and through child well visits, additional advocacy efforts are needed aimed at the retail industry and the public. The good news is you can help. The next time a friend or family's baby registry includes a bumper and blanket set, educate them about safe sleep recommendations. Instead of just liking a post of someone's decorated baby nursery on social media, add a comment with a link to the safe sleep guidelines. Yes, it might upset a friend or loved one, but it can literally save a life.

As for my kiddo, upon talking to the daycare provider about the situation, they said my son has started to roll over a little in his sleep. I haven't seen it at home, so I'm a little skeptical, but I was reassured by all three teachers that they always put children on their back to sleep. And the next day, and every day since, the crib sheet has been properly snug.

Cindy Hutter, MBA is the Director of Marketing and Digital Strategy at NICHQ