

**WHEN LOVE IS NOT ENOUGH**  
**What could drive a mom to physically harm her baby?**  
by Beth Cooper

SOMEONE told me a story once about a young mother driven to near insanity when her newborn refused to sleep or stop crying.

Exhausted, single and alone, she raced to the roof of her apartment building, baby in arms, and threatened to jump. Mercifully, she was pulled from the edge when residents responded to her screams.

Is it really possible than any well-balanced person could be pushed to this point? Tiredness and trauma are often hallmarks of the first few years of parenting, but is it “normal” to want to lash out at our babies?

The uncomfortable truth, say experts, is that many of us face this temptation and feel heavy with guilt because of it. Some parents buckle – and babies get hurt.

“Many things can trigger the anger that often precedes thoughts of abusing or actual abuse,” says child therapist Orli Zaacks of the Anxiety and Trauma Clinic.

“It can happen when an innocent baby has colic and has been crying for hours. It can happen when a baby refuses to stay in his or her bed at night. Sometimes it happens when a baby throws a tantrum, won’t quit screaming and the noise fills the parent’s head until the parent feels overwhelmed.”

### **Breaking point**

There are several factors that may contribute to the likelihood of physical harm, says Zaacks. These include :

- **Isolation and lack of support.** When there is no one, such as extended family, friends, a partner or community support to help with the demands of parenting
- **Stress.** Financial pressures, job worries, medical problems or taking care of a family member with a disability can increase stress and overwhelm parents
- **Unrealistic expectations.** A lack of understanding of a child’s developmental stages and behaviour
- **Lack of parenting skills.** Not knowing how to help children learn, grow and behave in a positive way
- **Drug and alcohol problems.** Addiction or substance abuse may limit parents’ abilities to meet their baby’s needs
- **Low self esteem and self confidence.** Sometimes insecure parents doubt their ability to meet a baby’s needs and do not seek help and support
- **Poor childhood experiences.** Inter-generational patterns of abuse.

Physical harm – or the risk of physically harming a baby – can occur when stress, tiredness, lack of skills, information and support combine to make the pressure of caring for babies overwhelming, explains Zaacks.

“There is no good reason to abuse or hurt a baby. Babies need unconditional love, compassion and understanding. They need to be listened to and allowed to cry and express their emotions.

“But knowing all this, and believing it with all of one’s heart, does not prevent a parenting from hurting his or her baby.”

Battered Baby Syndrome is the official term for non-accidental injuries sustained by a baby as a result of physical abuse, inflicted by an adult caregiver. The term was coined by German-born American paediatrician Charles Henry Kempe and refers to a pattern of physical and psychological injuries inflicted on a baby by intentional neglect or repeated, excessive beating by a parent or carer.

Shaken Baby Syndrome refers to a combination of injuries sustained when a baby or child is violently shaken. According to health reports, thousands of cases are filed each year and 60% of victims are boys.

Sources : *Anxiety and Trauma Clinic*, [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com) and [www.faqs.org](http://www.faqs.org)

## **The sleep factor**

Jacqui Flint, mom of two, is the owner of Baby Love, a local organisation offering routine and specialist sleep support to babies and their parents. Her eldest son, Cameron (5) is the reason she became involved in the organisation several years ago.

Baby Love believes that sleep deprivation is a major cause of tension between parent and child – and a cementing factor leading to thoughts of harming a baby.

‘Baby bashing’ – or the urge to ‘baby bash’, as the organisation terms it, is more common than we realise or want to believe, says Flint.

“My son, then seven months, wasn’t sleeping at night and the constant, ongoing sleep deprivation led me to the brink of wanting to physically harm him. I actually wanted to bash his head against the wall just for peace and quiet and to be able to sleep.

“Fortunately for us, I didn’t act on the urge, but instead implemented a routine and sleep guidance programme which saw him sleeping well night and day within one week. We had normality back in our lives! We had our lives back!”

Flint is constantly reminded of how many moms feel the way she did. During her workshops and private sessions, she explains to parents that it’s okay to feel love for a baby but still resent him, want to shake him, feel a sense of loss of control or a belief that having a child was the biggest mistake of their lives.

## Red flags

Be aware of the signs that you – or another parent – are reaching breaking point and may feel compelled to do physical harm.

Problem areas include parental alcohol or substance abuse, previous abuse of a baby or the baby's siblings, a history of mental or emotional problems in the parents, childhood abuse of the parent or absence of visible parental love or concern, says Zaacks.

"From my personal experience, I had feelings of intense resentment and dislike towards my baby and at times handled him unnecessarily roughly," says Flint.

Other warning signs include :

- Doesn't enjoy being a mom
- Keeps referring to her old life pre-baby, insinuating that this is what she longs for
- Doesn't enjoy spending time with her baby
- Finds the responsibility of having a baby is daunting and overwhelming and may be resentful
- Says having a baby was the biggest mistake she ever made
- Shows no interest in the baby.

"While these signs do not necessarily mean that a mom is thinking of physically harming her baby, they do indicate that things are not as they should be and that help is necessary," explains Flint.

An unfortunate fact is that parents often refuse to admit they're not coping. Maternal guilt and societal pressure to be "the perfect mother" take their toll on a new parent, who does not realise that sleep deprivation, depression or negative external circumstances are good enough reasons to seek professional help – or least some sort of regular support.

## What to do when you're in trouble

There are several helpful ways to avoid the "danger zone", says Flint.

First, *always remove yourself from the situation* by placing baby in his cot or handing him over to a reliable, trusted caregiver.

Make a refreshment and take a deep breath, she says. Only go back to your baby's bedroom – or fetch him from a caregiver – once you feel in control again.

"Even if this means leaving your baby to scream, know that your baby is safer without you at this point."

Walking in the garden, phoning a friend, listening to calming music and acknowledging that you are not coping and therefore need help are good steps to take.

Taking Rescue Remedy drops – and some for baby too (diluted or on the soles of his feet) is very useful.

Zaacks advises that every situation is different, with some situations being more dangerous than others and needing immediate intervention.

Ideas that have worked for most parents in the long run, however, include :

- Ask for help in advance from someone you trust. Let that person hold you accountable. When you feel like hurting your baby, call that person
- Watch for signs that you're reaching your limit
- Ask yourself : am I really angry at my baby or is the anger stemming from another unhappy situation in my life? Toxic relationships could be bringing you down
- Take care of yourself. Sleep enough, eat healthily and drink lots of water.

### **Emergency measures**

Alone and about to lose it? The Anxiety and Trauma Clinic offers top tips to help you cope.

- Splash cold water on your face
- Sing a song
- Quote a passage of scripture or a favourite verse to yourself (write them out and place them around the house as reminders)
- Take time out (leave baby with someone else)
- Hug or yell into a pillow
- Count to ten.

While these intervention measures may seem obvious, they work on both an emotional and physiological level and will help to calm you down.

### **Conclusion**

Raising a young child is no picnic. The temptation to lose control is very real – and you're not a failure if you feel this way. Being brave enough to admit the problem is a far safer option than stoic silence and gnawing guilt.

### **Sources and help**

**The Anxiety and Trauma Clinic** provides specialised treatment for anxiety disorders and trauma-related conditions in both children and adults, without the use of drugs or medication. For an assessment, contact the clinic at (011) 883 4552, email [info@atclinic.co.za](mailto:info@atclinic.co.za) or visit [www.atclinic.co.za](http://www.atclinic.co.za)

**Baby Love** helps parents and babies with sleep problems and routines. If you suspect that lack of sleep is causing problems for you, your partner and/or your baby, please contact Jacqui Flint on 082 851 2141 or visit [www.baby-love.co.za](http://www.baby-love.co.za)