

Occupational Therapy Doctoral Student Capstone: Safe Sleep



Introduction

Natalie McFarren is a third year Occupational Therapy (OT) student completing her Doctoral Experiential Capstone (DEC) with Safe Kids Grand Forks. A DEC helps the student to learn new skills in a subject area of their choosing. They choose a workplace and a project to complete with evidence-based practice. Natalie has always been passionate about working with the kids and just finished work at a pediatric outpatient setting. That was a truly valuable experience.

Natalie learned about Safe Kids Grand Forks through a professor in the University of North Dakota (UND) OT department. They suggested reaching out to Carma Hanson (Safe Kids Grand Forks Coordinator) for more information about how OT and of Safe Kids Grand Forks could come together to prevent child injuries. Natalie had a great interest in one of the topics Safe Kids does a lot of work in: safe sleep. Together, we hope to work on some ways to prevent Sudden Unintentional Infant Death (SUID).

As she has been preparing for her time with Safe Kids Grand Forks, Natalie wanted to share some of her “Aha!” moments that have come up while learning more about safe sleep.



“Aha!” Moments: Safe Sleep Edition

“Aha!” Moment 1: Sudden Unexpected Infant Death Definition

Sudden Unexpected Infant Death (SUID) is a term that includes three sub categories:

- 1) **Accidental suffocation and strangulation in bed:** When the nose and mouth or neck and chest are covered by soft or loose bedding or getting stuck in between soft surfaces
- 2) **Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS):** Death cannot be explained after case investigation, review of medical information, or autopsy
- 3) **Unknown:** Not enough information is available to determine cause of death

“Aha!” Moment 2: Dangers of Stomach and Side Sleeping

The dangers of stomach and side sleeping for infants include:

- Risk of suffocation and SIDS doubles
- Can lead to upper airway obstruction
- Risk of overheating
- Harder for baby to wake, which increases the risk for SUID
- Side sleeping is often unstable and can lead to stomach sleeping

It is recommended that baby be placed **on their back** when going to sleep, both at night and for naps!

<p>“Aha!” Moment 3: Anatomy</p>	<p>Many believe that stomach sleeping prevents baby from choking if they were to spit up in their sleep. However, when babies are placed on their back, their esophagus (the swallowing tube) is below the trachea (the airway). If baby were to spit up while laying on their back, the contents would come out of the mouth and any remaining contents would go back down the esophagus where it belongs by force of gravity. On the other hand, if baby spits up while on their stomach, the stomach contents would end up going into the trachea and potentially the lungs. This is known as aspiration.</p>
<p>“Aha!” Moment 4: Room Sharing</p>	<p>Babies benefit from sharing a room with caregivers or parents for at least six months. But baby should have their own separate sleep surface. They should be away from caregivers, siblings, pets, etc. Their sleep surface should be safe and only include a firm mattress, tightly fitted sheet, and pacifier. Half of infants who die due to sleep-related concerns in the U.S. were found sleeping with their parents or caregivers. Sharing the room with caregivers or parents has been shown to reduce the risk of infant suffocation or SIDS by 50%.</p>
<p>“Aha!” Moment 5: Benefits of Breastmilk</p>	<p>Babies who are breastfed are at a lower risk of diarrhea and respiratory infections, both of which are symptoms linked to higher risk for suffocation and SIDS. Breastmilk, whether it is through direct breastfeeding, pumping, or approved donor milk, provides antibodies and micronutrients that support the developing immune system.</p>

Contact Information

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References

Cribs for Kids (2026). Safe sleep ambassador training 2026. Cribs for Kids. <https://cribsforkids.org/safe-sleep-ambassador/>