

Box 3.1 Shaken Baby Syndrome

The leading cause of death among physically abused children is death associated with some type of injury to the head, referred to in the medical community as abusive head trauma (AHT; R. Berger & Bell, 2014; Lind et al., 2016). The large majority (81%) of these children are under the age of 4, with 46 percent under the age of 1 at the time of their deaths (U.S. DHHS, 2010). Although the precise mechanisms leading to AHT in cases of CPA have been hotly debated, one common cause of head injury to children is referred to as shaken baby syndrome (SBS).

Shaken baby syndrome results when a caregiver violently shakes a child, causing the child's brain to move within the skull. Such shaking can result in severe injury, coma, or even death. Indeed, of children diagnosed with SBS, approximately 20–25 percent die as a result of their injuries, and only 8–36 percent achieve a “good” recovery (K. Barlow, Thomson, Johnson, & Minns, 2005; Chevignard & Lind, 2014; Lind et al., 2016). The damage can result from any number of causes, such as stretching and tearing blood vessels and brain tissue, disrupting the oxygen supply to the brain, and death of brain cells (Reece, 2011). The children who do survive frequently have lifelong problems such as intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, impaired vision or blindness, seizure disorders, learning disabilities, behavioral difficulties, or physical and emotional growth delays (Lind et al., 2016; Ornstein & Ward, 2012). In addition to permanent neurologic and associated damage, SBS also carries tremendous familial and societal consequences. SBS can result in children being removed from their homes, parents losing their parental rights, and adults being convicted and imprisoned for their actions (C. Christian, Block, & Committee on Child Abuse & Neglect, 2009).

Individuals who confess to shaking a child most commonly report difficulty trying to console a crying baby as the antecedent to the behavior. They often report that they felt frustrated, lost control, or “snapped” at the time the shaking occurred (E. Bell, Shouldice, & Levin, 2011; Reece, 2011; Russell, 2010). Another common reason for abusive shaking of a baby is when a caretaker perceives that a child is misbehaving and the caretaker either cannot stop or cannot tolerate the behavior (Isser & Schwartz, 2006). In one case, a man was accused of assaulting his girlfriend's 3-year-old child (Bell et al., 2011). At the time of the abuse, the man was the only adult in the home and was feeling frustrated because one child under his care was screaming in one room while he was bathing

(Continued)