

# Awakening to Dangers of Shaking Babies

## Mother Takes Her Campaign for Awareness, Prevention Into Restaurants

By **Jennifer Buske** Washington Post Staff Writer  
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A billboard on northbound Route 28 shows Manassas infant Ryan Sanders grasping for life. It's hard for drivers to ignore.

And now, thanks to his mother, Cathy, a similar display will reach more than just motorists as she launches another initiative to raise awareness about the abuse that changed her child's life more than 15 years ago.

Sanders, who started the group Shaken Baby Prevention after her 8-week-old son was violently shaken by a caregiver, signed a contract with Table Top Productions to place her organization's message about shaken-baby syndrome under glass tabletops at Foster's Grilles in Chantilly, as well as in Frederick, Md.

"I try to get the biggest bang for my buck," Sanders said about why she decided to place the ads in restaurants. "That public service announcement will be in those tables for three years. There are 27 tables at each restaurant, and Foster's Grille gets a huge amount of customers, so there will be a lot of people who see it."



Experts describe shaken-baby syndrome as a head injury in which vigorous shaking causes the brain to slam back and forth against the skull. Infants are susceptible because their necks are not developed.

Ryan, who was shaken in 1992 by a caregiver, is now 15. Sanders said he does not talk and is still being toilet-trained. He suffers from cerebral palsy and has optic nerve damage in both eyes. He cannot run or climb, and Sanders said doctors recently discovered he has developed osteoporosis as a result of cerebral palsy.

Sanders made a commitment to spread awareness about shaken-baby syndrome. She has sponsored billboards stating "Shaking a Baby Shatters Lives" in Virginia and states including Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, Utah and Wisconsin. She also placed the announcement on public buses in Northern Virginia and in the District last April as part of Child Abuse Prevention Month.

The restaurant announcement shows Ryan attempting to stand with the help of crutches.

"I didn't make them graphic like my billboards because it's a family restaurant," said Sanders, whose billboards show Ryan wrapped in gauze, with intravenous and breathing tubes after the 1992 incident. "But I wanted something to open the doors up for communication between teenagers and children and their parents."

Sanders said though she got a package deal for placing the announcement in the first two restaurants, it will cost her \$3,000 per store for a three-year contract. Tables, she said, are "a lot" more expensive than billboards because there is no discount for a public service announcement.

Sanders said she is working to get the advertisement in other restaurants, but because of the cost, it will take time. She receives donations through her Web site, <http://www.sbsprevention.com>. Most money goes toward helping children with special needs, she said.

"We're committed to spending thousands of dollars every year toward kids with all kinds of special needs," Sanders said, adding that last year money went toward therapeutic horseback riding scholarships and items such as special keyboards and bathing chairs. "Prevention ads are something we do usually once a year."

Paul B. Ebert, the Prince William County Commonwealth's attorney, said the county does not keep records on the number of shaken-baby cases, however, it is "not uncommon to see at least one or two a year."

"We've had a lot of shaken-baby cases," Ebert said. "It's usually done in a fit of rage, and some people don't realize how dangerous shaking a child can be. In most cases, they are out of control when they injure or kill the child."

Ebert said people on trial in Prince William for shaking a baby are usually charged with second-degree murder or manslaughter if the child dies. If the child survives, the defendant is usually charged with reckless endangerment or unlawful wounding.

The day-care provider who shook Ryan Sanders was convicted of felony child abuse and sentenced to four years in prison.

"These cases are always the saddest when a small child is killed or severely injured," Ebert said. "This office takes it very seriously and hopes the incidents decline in the future."

Nationally, 3,000 to 5,000 shaken-baby cases occur yearly, said Craig Futterman, president of Shaken Baby Alliance and associate director of the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Inova Fairfax Hospital for Children, adding that it is hard to track exact numbers.

Inova hospital has seen a couple of cases this year and "it's only the middle of March," Futterman said. Although the incidents that occurred this year "haven't been bad," about a third of children affected die. About a third to half suffer significant neurological damage, said Futterman, who treated Ryan years ago.

Like Sanders, Futterman and his Fort Worth-based group work to inform parents, law enforcement personnel and lawyers about shaken-baby syndrome.

"I think awareness makes a difference, and the more people know about it, the less likely they are to do it," Futterman said. "I applaud Cathy for her efforts and congratulate her on this latest initiative. She is a one-woman campaign, and she probably will single-handedly save some kids."