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July 25, 2013

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Charlie's Story Inspires First-Ever Children's Bedtime Book to Tackle Safe Sleep

Of the countless trials any parent must endure, perhaps none is more heart wrenching than the tragic and sudden loss of a child. No matter the age, the death of a child will test one's faith to its core, and forever leave a broken heart. Of course, sometimes such a tragedy can spur action and turn sadness into a positive force for change.

This is the story of a young couple that lived through such a nightmare but came out stronger and with a purpose to prevent additional death through education. Along the way, they built a foundation that has already touched countless lives, and likely saved a few. This is the story of Charlie and his courageous parents.

Sam and Maura Hanke were college sweethearts and a blissfully happy married couple. They surrounded themselves with friends and family and relished in anticipation of children and a life full of love and happiness. Their dreams of parenthood came true on April 6, 2010 when they welcomed their son Charlie Paul into the world. He was healthy and beautiful, and for them, like many new parents, the reason the sun rose and set each day.

Sam, a pediatric cardiologist, and Maura, a kindergarten teacher, wished and hoped for their baby a long, joyful and happy life. They imagined his future. They made plans. After a healthy, routine pregnancy, Charlie came into the world a perfect 7lb. 11 oz. baby boy. "We celebrated the day he came home from the hospital - we read him stories; we gave him baths. He brought us so much joy in everyday things," Sam painfully recalls.

At just three weeks old, in the early morning hours of April 28, Charlie died, a victim of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) and an unsafe sleep environment. That night, like many of us, Sam had laid on the couch with Charlie; the perfect picture of sleep-deprived father and son. It wasn't unusual; we so often see this photo on Facebook -- baby asleep on dad's chest, dad sound asleep too. Sam woke up, Charlie didn't.

What we now know, that may not be realized when "liking" these cute photos, is this sleepy snuggle is actually dangerous for our babies. Co-sleeping and tummy sleeping are two of the leading risk factors for SIDS, and this includes those innocent naps on the couch or accidentally falling asleep after nursing in the night. So, when trying to calm a newborn at 2 a.m., or sneaking a few extra zzz's during the day, think of Charlie. Maura and Sam want you to know that your baby is safest on his or her back alone in their crib, and this has become one of their life missions.

With each milestone in the year that followed the loss of Charlie, Maura and Sam slowly started to pick up the pieces and heal, but they needed to make sense of losing Charlie so soon. Fueled by faith and the strength and encouragement of friends and family they looked for a bigger way to remember Charlie and most importantly try to prevent other families from suffering this same pain.

Charlie's Kids Foundation was founded on what would have been Charlie's first birthday. The mission was clear, to raise awareness and support of SIDS by educating families, providing resources for new parents and promoting dialogue about SIDS and safe sleep practices.

“My wife and I noted that we received a huge stack of papers, pamphlets and brochures when we were discharged home from the hospital with Charlie. This was information overload, and this combined with sleep deprivation made learning and comprehension challenging. We knew there was an opportunity for a different approach to teaching safe sleep practices,” explains Sam.

The goal of Charlie's Kids Foundation became a focused passion. They wouldn't rest until they developed and instituted a new outreach for SIDS education and safe sleep education.

Charlie's Kids focused their outreach on education of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) 2011 Safe Sleep Recommendations, creating the Dos and Don'ts of safe sleep in an easy-to-read bulleted format. Armed with this list and their experiences as new parents and educators in early literacy and advocacy, and the idea for a children's book was born. They commissioned pediatrician and author Dr. John Hutton and illustrator Leah Busch to create *Sleep Baby Safe and Snug* exclusively for Charlie's Kids Foundation.

Sleep Baby, Safe and Snug Board Book provides the safe sleep message in the context of a beautifully written and illustrated children's story. Because books are often part of the traditional bedtime routine, this board book provides safe sleep instructions and reminders right before the child is placed in their sleeping environment.

Perhaps most important, unlike the traditional brochures on safe sleep new parents receive at the hospital, people will cherish this book and read it to their child numerous times reinforcing the safe sleep guidelines.

In one of Charlie's Kids most exciting advocacy efforts, *Sleep Baby Safe and Snug* is now being included in every safe sleep survival kit distributed by the national organization Cribs for Kids. The National Cribs for Kids® Infant Safe Sleep Initiative provides safe-sleep cribs and other safe-sleep products to at-risk families around the country.

Sleep Baby Safe and Snug makes a fantastic gift for any new parents and grandparents. The simple rhymes and beautiful pictures make it the perfect bedtime read. Like, *Goodnight Moon*, you'll read it over and over before you kiss your little ones goodnight. But, unlike other tales, you'll sleep soundly, too, knowing your baby is SAFE and snug.

Sleep Baby Safe and Snug is now available on Amazon.com. Proceeds from the book go towards fulfilling the Charlie's Kids mission of educating families about safe sleep and SIDS. It is also available to hospitals, health departments and other community organizations at a reduced price. Visit www.charlieskids.org for more details.