

# Parents of baby who died after being neglected, 'severely shaken' each deny they killed infant

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The baby was just five months old when she died. (ABC News: Gregor Salmon)

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The mother and father of a baby who died after being shaken have denied killing the child, despite police believing that one of them did.

**WARNING: This article contains details that readers may find distressing.**

**Key points:**

The pair, who have now separated, were giving evidence at a Perth inquest into the death of the five-month-old girl in May 2019.

The baby, who had been born premature, died after suffering a catastrophic brain injury.

Medical experts at Perth Children's Hospital determined the cause was shaking, and found there were other earlier injuries, including fractures.

The mother, who cannot be named for legal reasons, told the Coroner's Court she didn't harm her baby, and didn't see her husband do it.

Giving evidence with the assistance of an interpreter, the mother said she was always gentle with her children.

"I'm very patient with my kids," she told the court on Friday.

Both parents of the baby deny they were responsible for her death

The inquest was earlier told the baby had been "severely shaken"

A police officer said "a child was not responsible" for her injuries



She said she wanted to take the baby to the hospital after she noticed "something with her eye is not okay".

The court was told the infant was suffering seizures.

The mother did say the father had occasionally been violent towards her, pushing her and slapping her, as well as speaking angrily.

The father admitted to having been violent towards his wife, saying he was ashamed of it, but he denied ever shaking his baby daughter.

He referred to the night they took her to hospital, saying he didn't know what was wrong, describing her eyes as "one was uppish and one was downish" and she was in a "sleepy state".

The father speculated that one of their three other children may have caused it, but not "purposefully".

### **Mother 'wasn't coping'**

He told the court he thought his wife was coping with bringing up the four children, "but she obviously wasn't".

When Deputy Coroner Sarah Linton asked him about evidence that the family had little interaction with other people, he answered they "just kept to ourselves really".

He said his wife had a lot of friends before she had kids and then was "totally" focused on being a mother.

### **Baby died after being 'severely shaken', inquest hears**

A baby died at the age of five months after being shaken and neglected, an inquest has heard. **WARNING: This article contains details that readers may find distressing.**

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When asked why there had been little contact with his own family members, he said he had been "embarrassed about my lifestyle".

He admitted lying to the police about drug use when he was interviewed after his daughter died.

The father said he had used methylamphetamine and cannabis, but told the court he had stopped using meth by the time his fourth child was born.

He claimed his wife had used meth after the birth of their first child, but she had told the court she'd stopped before that.

The court heard the mother and the father had separated and now had shared custody of their three children.

### **'Child not responsible': Police**

The court heard from Detective Sergeant Gregory Hart, who gave an account of police investigations.

The two parents had been arrested twice each, in relation to the death of the baby, and released without charge.



He told the court police obtained covert recordings, one of which, in July 2019, captured an argument about the child's death, followed by an assault.

"You killed my girl, you're finished," the father said.

"You murdered our little baby.

"You need mental help."

The court heard the father was charged with assault after slapping the mother, and impeding her breathing.

The court was told that during the argument, the mother appeared to make admissions about killing the baby, but Detective Sergeant Hart said the recording "didn't provide a reliable piece of information" due to the context.

There was another recording during which the father was heard encouraging the mother to kill herself with a knife.

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The court was told the homicide squad didn't turn up any evidence of drug use occurring around the time of the baby's death.

Detective Sergeant Hart told the Coroner's Court the police investigation could not exclude either parent.

"A child was not responsible for this," he said.

### **Intervention a 'last resort'**

The inquest also heard from Department of Communities District Director Emma Ferguson, who said intervention action in relation to families "is always the last resort".

Ms Ferguson said the first priority was always to engage with parents.

The court had heard of the family's house being in "disrepair" with exposed live wiring and a lack of running water, leading to Communities putting them in a 'safe house' some days before the baby died.



Deputy Coroner Sarah Linton referred to a "strong smell of urine around the

house", and while the department sometimes saw a "lower standard", there were "red flags" to consider.

Ms Ferguson said this was why the case had remained open, with an intention to provide intensive support.

"There were real worries," she told the court.

In her evidence, the mother explained the home had tank water, which sometimes ran out, and said there were no lights working.



The father told the court the water tank was small, and there was a live wire hanging from the ceiling because he'd removed a "wonky" fan.

The father also told the court that before the death of his daughter, he had been at the family home trying to fix it up so they could go back there.

### **Coroner concludes baby was shaken**

Ms Ferguson said Communities had brought in changes to practices, including consideration of "perpetrator patterns" in terms of coercive control and the impacts on a family.

She offered her condolences to the family

of the baby, saying that Communities staff statewide had been "deeply impacted" by her death.

Deputy Coroner Linton said she was satisfied the baby had died as a result of being shaken, and that the mother or the father did it.

She said she may not be able to say beyond reasonable doubt which parent it was, and she was going to consider submissions from the lawyers for the mother and the father.

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The baby's father is represented by Tom Percy KC, while the mother's lawyer is Lachlan Palmos.

Ms Linton did say that while there was no excuse for the mother killing the child, she believed the environment she was in was "untenable" and this was the responsibility of the father.

She told the court there were "a number of times" Communities could've changed the path for the infant.