

# Parenting duties focus of baby's death

By [Anthony Cormier](#)

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Deputies are investigating a woman on charges of child neglect after her 2-month-old son fell ill and died last month. Authorities want to know whether the woman, Georgianna M. Steible, used drugs and failed to check on her son before finding him unconscious in his crib two weeks ago, according to court documents. The boy died a few hours after he was taken to a trauma unit, leading detectives to question Steible, 19, about how she treated his illness and whether she was impaired while the child was sick.

The case highlights how deeply law enforcement officials will go to investigate neglect cases and raises questions about what steps a parent needs to take to care for an ailing infant.

Neither Steible, a line cook at a McDonald's in south Sarasota County, nor the baby's father, David Brown, would comment. The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office says the case is ongoing and that detectives are awaiting word from the medical examiner to determine how the infant, Tanto Brown, died.

"We take a child's death very seriously," said Wendy Rose, a spokeswoman for the Sheriff's Office. "Right now we're still waiting for more information from the medical examiner before we make any kind of determination."

Police documents show that the infant was ill in early December and Steible treated him with over-the-counter medicine. But when the illness persisted, Steible took the boy to the Charlotte County Health Department and, later, an emergency room. A physician gave him a diagnosis of bronchiolitis and prescribed a medicine that was to be given with a misting device. The doctor also told Steible not to lay the child on his stomach in the crib -- which is commonly told to parents because of the risk of suffocation or sudden infant death syndrome.

But that night, Steible could not find a pharmacy to fill the prescription and she went home. She put the baby in bed, on his stomach, then Steible took three Tylenol PM capsules and fell asleep. At midnight, her boyfriend, Brown, came home and went to sleep. He awoke at 7 a.m. the next day and went to work. Brown said he did not check on the boy. By 9 a.m., Brown's mother came to the home on North Maple Street to pick up the prescription. She found that Steible had just woken up.

What happened next is unclear -- but is critical to the case. Detectives are trying to establish a time line of when Steible checked on the child, but say in reports that she "gave inconsistent accounts of when, or if, she actually awoke during the day to provide care for the baby." According to a report by deputies who responded to a 911 call, Steible said she put the boy down at 1:30 p.m. in his crib. She went in 45 minutes later for a nebulizer treatment and found that he had wiggled himself into a corner of the crib and was not breathing. She called Brown at work, and then dialed 911.

Steible and Brown admitted to deputies that they have used marijuana and other drugs in the past, according to the search warrant in the case. And when police looked through the home, they reportedly found drug paraphernalia -- such as a piece of aluminium foil shaped into a pipe -- on the lanai and in the master bedroom.

No one has been charged in the case. But the investigation has all the hallmarks of a child death inquiry, experts say. And it points to how authorities treat infants' deaths as a law enforcement or child welfare issue, investigating each case thoroughly to find out exactly what happened.

Each year, the state tracks deaths caused by child abuse or neglect. In 2007 -- the most recently available data -- 68 percent of all abuse- and neglect-related deaths happened to children younger than 1. Two-thirds of the cases were from neglect. State investigators found that the bulk of those cases were related to two issues: drowning and unsafe sleeping conditions. Parents are usually informed not to place a child in a crib on its stomach and are warned not to sleep with a baby in bed.

A local investigator, Maj. Connie Shingledecker of the Manatee County Sheriff's Office, leads the state's Child Abuse Death Review team and is considered one of the most experienced welfare investigators in Florida. She would not comment on the specifics of the Sarasota County investigation but said that detectives are taught to look at the big picture -- and all of the circumstances -- when investigating a death. Authorities should consider the age of the baby, the parents' arrest histories, prior welfare investigations, the explanation offered by parents and what an autopsy determines as the cause of death. "When you're doing a child death case, you have to look at the totality of the circumstances," Shingledecker said. "You have to really take a look at the history in a home, how the child's death was reported, whether the parents have a history of drugs or violence, all of those things."