

Kids left in hot cars could be saved by alarms

May 15, 2015, [Beth Kassab](#), ORLANDO SENTINEL bkassab@orlandosentinel.com

Who decided a dead battery was more important than a dead baby?

I can understand leaving home with your cellphone still sitting on the kitchen counter.

Or forgetting to pick up eggs at the grocery store.

Even going too many days without watering the plant in the corner.

But forgetting a baby in the back seat of a car?

That I can't understand.

Janette Fennell says my incredulity is only because it hasn't happened to me.

"Everyone thinks it's not going to happen to them, and that's the biggest mistake you can make," said Fennell, founder and president of KidsandCars.org, which advocates for car safety.

This week a Lake City dad forgot to drop off his 16-month-old daughter at day care and didn't discover his mistake until he returned from work.

By then the toddler was dead, likely the result of heatstroke.

More than 70 children have died in Florida this way in the past two decades. The count is up to more than 700 nationwide.

The temperature can rise more than 20 degrees inside a locked car in only about 10 minutes.

Children can't sweat and regulate their body temperature as well as adults, so they are more likely to succumb to overpowering heat.

Fennell says there's also science behind the parent who forgets a child in the back seat.

It sounds crass, she says, but it's not all that different from leaving a cup of coffee on the roof of your car and driving away.

"We have competing memory systems in our brain," she says. "Your habit memory is so strong. Have you ever driven to work and then thought, 'How did I get here?'"

David Diamond, a neuroscientist at the University of South Florida and VA Hospital in Tampa, backs up this theory.

"People accuse these parents of basically being monsters," he said. "They say these parents are too busy with their own lives to care about their children. I have interviewed these parents ... I know these people, and they are incredibly normal people."

In the case of the coffee left on the roof of the car, he said, as soon as you reach into your purse or your pocket and pick up your keys, you've activated your habit memory and suppressed your conscious, fact-based memory.

That's how, he said, you can end up at work and not recall the details of your drive.

"People say you can forget coffee, but you should never forget a child," Diamond told me. "I agree with that. But it doesn't mean it doesn't happen."

OK, so let's say conflicting memory systems are to blame and some overtired parents pay the ultimate price when they discover it was their child who was left behind.

What can we do about it?

That's where we can turn to the auto industry, car-seat manufacturers and government regulators.

There are systems in our cars to remind us of virtually everything. Alarms sound when we don't buckle our seat belts, fail to turn off our headlights or don't close the door all the way.

But there's no such system that comes standard in cars for car seats. Why not?

The auto industry saw fit to finally require manufacturers to install trunk releases to prevent people — whether victims of crime or kids playing around — from becoming locked inside.

And by 2018 all new cars must include rearview backup cameras. More children are killed by vehicles backing up than any other way when it comes to non-traffic-related car deaths. (Heatstroke is the second most common cause.)

Fennell says devices have been invented to help alert parents if a child is left in a car seat, but so far the auto industry hasn't included them in new models.

KidsandCars.org started a petition that called for regulators to require some form of that technology, but it hasn't gotten any traction.

"In today's market you cannot buy a new car that doesn't automatically turn off headlights," Fennell asked. "Who decided it's more important not to have a dead car battery than a dead baby?"

I'm sympathetic to the idea that parents shouldn't need technology to remind them of their most important responsibility: their child.

But if an alarm system could help keep kids alive by snapping a distracted or exhausted parent out of autopilot, then why wouldn't we add that to the umpteen other alarms already in our cars?

I can't understand that, either.

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