

Car, restaurant designs factors in child's death

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The death of a young boy after he darted in front of a large pickup in the drive-through lane of a McDonald's restaurant Thursday in Wichita reflects "an epidemic" of traffic fatalities involving young children, a national child safety advocate said Friday.

"I would say it's definitely an epidemic," said Janette Fennell, president and founder of Kids and Cars, the Leawood-based organization dedicated to protecting children from non-traffic motor vehicle accidents. "We as adults have made the world very unsafe for children."

Wichita police labeled the design of the restaurant property at Webb Road and Harry Street "hazardous" because it creates blind zones for both pedestrians and motorists.

The 3-year-old boy died at Wesley Medical Center about an hour after he was struck by a Chevy Avalanche in the drive-through lane of the McDonald's, police said.

The boy's twin brother and his grandmother had walked out of the restaurant together. The 26-year-old driver of the Avalanche stopped for them as he entered the drive-through lane on the north side of the building, then began pulling forward when it seemed the lane was clear.

The second twin, who was leaving the store with his grandfather, darted out into the parking lot in an attempt to catch up with his brother. The driver never saw the second twin before it was too late, witnesses told police.

The child was transported to Wesley Medical Center, where he died at 5:30 p.m.

No charges are anticipated.

"It's just a tragic accident," police spokesman Gordon Bassham said -- but changes are needed, Fennell and others declared.

In 2006 alone, Fennell said, more than 55 children around the country were killed in "front-over" accidents -- struck in driveways and parking lots by drivers who couldn't see them in front of their vehicles.

Her organization used to focus on "back-over" accidents similar to the incident Wednesday at Buckner Performing Arts Magnet School, when a woman couldn't see a 5-year-old boy leaning over behind her car and ran over him as she backed out of a parking stall.

The kindergarten student is hospitalized at Wesley Medical Center, recovering from internal injuries.

But the number of cases in which a child is killed in a "front-over" accident has mushroomed in recent years, Fennell said, forcing advocates to study the issue more closely.

"What a lot of it is tied to is the dramatic change in the vehicle mix," Fennell said. "It wasn't five years ago, we were all driving sedans. But over 50 percent of the vehicles purchased since then are classified as light trucks: minivans, SUVs, pickup trucks."

Those vehicles are bigger and higher off the ground -- making it tougher to see a toddler in front of them.

"You just have these visibility problems," Fennell said. "We're driving blind, and that's where these incidents are happening."

Thursday's deadly outcome was the result of a convergence of factors, officials said: a young child, a flawed store layout and a vehicle with a sizable blind zone.

It was only natural for the boy to want to catch up to his grandmother and twin brother.

"When you're 3, everything's a race -- everything's a competition," Fennell said.

Customers leaving the restaurant walk next to a wall that is part of an enclosed "play zone" that juts about 4 feet into the parking lot. That wall blocks the view of both pedestrians and motorists entering the drive-through lane, Wichita police Sgt. Bruce Watts said.

"You have to go right out to the edge of the building and peek around the corner," Watts said. "It's kind of a hazardous little deal right there."

And yet it's not uncommon for restaurant drive-through lanes to be very close to the doors used by walk-in customers.

In fact, such designs are becoming more numerous -- particularly among fast-food franchises, said Keith Diaz Moore, associate professor of architecture at the University of Kansas.

"What they're removing is any sense of buffer between where the car is and where your entry is to a building," Diaz Moore said. "If you think of most buildings, we have some kind of setback from traffic -- whether it's concrete or grass. Those are for safety reasons."

Those setbacks make it easier for drivers and pedestrians to see each other, Diaz Moore said, and can buy valuable time to avoid collisions.

Property designs for many restaurants using drive-through lanes "seem to violate a lot of traffic safety principles that we certainly expect for our streets and (public) buildings," he said. "I'm not quite sure why we don't expect it from our private property designs."

Roy McCalla, the McDonald's franchisee who owns the restaurant where the accident occurred, issued a written statement expressing "my deepest sympathies" to the boy's family and friends.

"The safety and security of my customers and employees is my top priority, and I am cooperating fully with the police in their investigation," McCalla said, adding that he would not comment further.

Drive-through lanes have become pillars of virtually any franchise's popularity, Diaz Moore said, so eliminating them isn't really an option. Instead, he said, property designs should try to separate pedestrians and motorists as much as possible -- and take into account the significant visibility limitations more vehicles have.

"Blind spots are a huge issue," Diaz Moore said, "and if we are not providing any space for people to become visible, how do they have a chance?"

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