

Car firms stalling on child safety?

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A two-year-old girl died in Calgary this week after her head became caught in the power window of a sports-utility vehicle.

Left alone in the idling car while her mother was doing an errand, she had been unbuckled from her car seat by an older brother (who then fell asleep).

This tragic death gives rise to a question. Since power windows are now a standard feature in most cars, can they be made safer for children?

Janette Fennell is the founder of a non-profit group, Kids and Cars (kidsandcars.org).

She wants all cars to have power windows that automatically reverse if something gets in the way.

Auto manufacturers already use an auto-reverse mechanism for power-operated accessories – such as windows, sliding doors and trunk latches – in some high-end vehicles.

She hasn't won the fight yet. But her lobbying efforts have led to a U.S. law requiring auto makers to use a safer switch to activate power windows, starting in the 2009 model year.

Older cars, such as the 1996 Chevrolet Blazer involved in the Calgary accident, have a toggle switch that responds to pressure when a child leans against it or stands on it.

In the future, cars will be equipped with a flush-mounted switch that must be pulled up or out to raise the power windows.

General Motors Corp. has built the safer switch into many of its 2007 and 2008 vehicles.

Fennell accuses North American auto makers of dragging their feet on design features that will prevent child deaths.

In Europe, 80 per cent of vehicles are manufactured with automatically reversing power windows – compared to 20 per cent of North American vehicles.

And European and Japanese vehicle makers have used the safer lift switch to raise power windows for the past 10 years.

Fennell's passion for child safety around cars came from a personal experience.

She and her husband were living in San Francisco in 1995, when they were robbed at gunpoint and forced into the trunk of their car. They were left for dead in a deserted area

When the couple managed to get out of the trunk, they found their nine-month-old infant son safe at their home.

"The abductors had thrown him, still in his car seat, onto the front lawn. His life was spared," she says in an interview from her home in Leawood, Kan.

The couple later discovered that many children had died after locking themselves in car trunks. So they put together the Trunk Releases Urgently Needed Coalition and spent four years lobbying for new legislation.

"We made sure there was a trunk release built into all vehicles built in 2002 and later, with a handle lit by phosphorus to make sure you could see it," she said.

Fennell kept hearing from parents who told her about other tragic deaths. That led her to start Kids and Cars, a national organization run by volunteers who compile data on accidents involving children.

She gained a valuable partner – Consumers Union, the non-profit publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine – which started a campaign called Safe Cars for Kids.

Besides window strangulation, the campaign focuses on deaths caused by cars backing up in residential driveways. In 70 per cent of these fatalities, a parent or close relative is the driver behind the wheel.

Auto makers can help prevent such accidents with technologies such as rear-detection obstacle sensors, already available in many luxury cars.

"Every car should be made with the latest child-safe technology," says the consumer group.

Of course, parents still have a responsibility to keep their children safe. This means never leaving them alone, not even for a minute, in or around parked cars.

But simply blaming parents for poor judgment is not the answer, says Phil Edmonston, author of the *Lemon-Aid* used car guides.

"Death or serious injury is too high a price to pay for a moment's inattention," he says.

"We need mandatory safety features that protect children from these kinds of hazards, even if they involve parental stupidity."

Fennell advises parents always to engage the lock mechanism on power windows so children can't play with them.

Finally, be aware that the power windows in many vehicles can be operated after the car is turned off and the key is removed from the ignition.

In many vehicles, they keep working until a car door is opened.

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