

## The Unattended Kids + Cars Expert Panel



### Recommendations **March 2001**

"We did not put children first in the design of our vehicles.  
Now we are paying a price."

Jim Hall, Chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)  
(served 1994 - 2000)



**KIDS 'N CARS™**

A CAR IS NOT A TOY

[www.kidsncars.org](http://www.kidsncars.org)

## Background

KIDS 'N CARS is a project of the Trauma Foundation, a nonprofit organization located in San Francisco. KIDS 'N CARS is dedicated to promoting an end to the practice of leaving children unattended in or around motor vehicles. In August 2000, KIDS 'N CARS received a state-wide grant award from the California Kids' Plates Program. Kids' Plates are California vehicle specialty license plates that generate funds for child injury and abuse prevention, and for childcare health and safety programs. KIDS 'N CARS used this grant to convene the "Unattended Kids + Cars Expert Panel" to study the issue of children who are left unattended in or around motor vehicles by parents and other care providers. The panel was also charged with developing recommendations for the State of California on how best to reduce or eliminate the risk of related preventable injuries and deaths. Experts in child injury prevention, law enforcement, childcare, education, traffic safety, public health and medicine, child passenger safety, data collection, and survivor advocates were represented on the panel.

There is little formal information about the risks associated with children left unattended in or around motor vehicles, or the magnitude of the problem. There are no federal or state data systems that capture information about these injuries and deaths. Paramedics, peace officers, and other first responders agree this practice is much more prevalent than reported.

KIDS 'N CARS is developing a national database of news reports, police reports, studies, and registry reports on this subject. Collection efforts to date illustrate the practice of leaving children unattended in or around cars, often by well-meaning parents and caregivers, has deadly consequences. This database demonstrates an alarming number of hyperthermia, strangulation, head crush, fracture, and burn injuries among children left unattended in or around vehicles.

The KIDS 'N CARS database contains 817 cases including 267 fatalities in the United States and 177 cases including 67 fatalities in the State of California. These data vastly underestimate the true number of incidents. An additional 650 incidents have been identified from published studies; but are not included in the above data because they did not contain enough detail to be incorporated in the KIDS 'N CARS database.

The Expert Panel met three times over the course of four months to discuss this issue, review expert commentary, and develop recommendations. During the first meeting, the Panel agreed that there is a scarcity of information, and that the true scope of the problem is unknown. However, the Panel found that the published research and data collected by KIDS 'N CARS were compelling, and provided a sufficient foundation for its policy recommendations.

The Panel determined that the practice of leaving children unattended in or around vehicles was a major issue that crossed all socio-economic levels, and that well-meaning parents and care providers were not aware of the potentially deadly consequences of this common social practice.

At the second meeting, the Expert Panel members turned their attention to legislative recommendations when Senator Jackie Speier expressed interest in authoring a bill on this topic. The Panel entered into a brainstorming session to provide informed, data-driven input to develop solid legislation. The third meeting of the Expert Panel dealt with refining recommendations and reviewing a draft of the proposed bill.



Researchers at the University of California, Irvine, examined incidents where young children were killed or hospitalized when a motor vehicle backed up at low speed and hit them (most often in private driveways). They calculated an average annual rate (1991-1992) in Central Orange County of about 23 injured children per 100,000 population (1-4 year olds). The rate for motor vehicle occupant hospitalizations/deaths for this same age group during this same time period was 22 per 100,000. **Surprisingly, this study showed that young children are at greater risk in private driveways and parking lots than as occupants of motor vehicles.**

## Recommendations

### Data Collection

Current computerized law enforcement and health system databases in California are unable to quantify the deaths and injuries resulting from children being left unattended in or around motor vehicles. **Brief narrative text should be added to records in computerized databases** (most importantly to police, fire, and medical records) to supplement coded information.

**The State of California should conduct a pilot study of innovative methods to gather data** on serious, emerging yet undocumented problems such as children being left unattended in or around motor vehicles. If successful, this study could become a model for identifying other such emerging health and safety problems in California.

**The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) should expand its data collection efforts to include motor vehicle related deaths and injuries caused by incidents that commonly occur on driveways, parking lots and other private areas commonly used by cars and trucks.**

## Education and Public Awareness

**Education and public awareness programs about the dangers are needed.** Panel members believe parents and caregivers are not aware of the dangers associated with leaving children unattended in or around vehicles. **These issues should be integrated within existing programs** to help educate Californians about this dangerous practice. Educational components need to be added to curricula such as those for driver education, driving schools, day care provider education, parenting and childbirth education, schools, and child passenger safety certification courses.

**A broad-based statewide campaign needs to be implemented** to address the potentially deadly consequences of leaving children unattended in or around motor vehicles. Messages and materials should be developed for a variety of target audiences and ethnic groups.

## Legislation and Enforcement

The Panel knows education alone is not enough to change behaviors associated with this dangerous practice.

**The "Unattended Child in Motor Vehicle Safety Act, Kaitlyn's Law," authored by Senator Speier needs to be passed.** Current child endangerment statutes do not specifically address the dangerous practice of leaving children unattended in vehicles. This proposed bill would provide law enforcement the ability to cite offenders, and this one-point offense would be punishable by a fine. These measures could help to deter this practice and potentially save the lives of many California children.

The heads of major public and private sector safety and health organizations should be encouraged to write to the Honorable Governor Davis, key legislators within the state, and major health and education agencies urging them to actively support immediate passage of this bill.

## Product Redesign

Necessary changes in motor vehicle design cannot be required by the State of California; these improvements are the jurisdiction of the federal government and the auto industry. However, if there is no federal standard governing some aspect of auto design, a state is not preempted from taking action: Nonetheless, improvements can be strongly encouraged through recommendations such as these developed by the expert panel, whose range of expertise and experiences "on the front lines" of highway and auto safety is extensive.

**Appropriate federal agencies (such as NHTSA) need to analyze all current Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) governing major safety systems to identify opportunities for improving children's safety in automotive design.** A separate strategic rulemaking plan, cataloging action items for FMVSS upgrades for children's safety should be published by the agency, at least bi-annually.

**The children's strategic plan would comprise a regulatory agenda,** including research and regulatory actions needed to change vehicle design to better protect children and prevent tragic incidences from happening when a child is left unattended in or around a motor vehicle.

**Areas for research focus include:**

- + Restricting access to the vehicle and to items within the vehicle
- + Childproofing vehicle interiors
- + Improving drivers vision when backing up

**Auto manufacturers should establish, on a voluntary basis while federal standards are developed, programs that support systematic and regular reviews of potential design changes that will improve the safety of children.**

To address the vast number of used and older vehicles already on the road, and until all new vehicles are manufactured with standard equipment solutions, **well-researched and manufactured aftermarket products aimed at solving some of the above problems should be available to the American public.**

Examples of such products include but are not limited to; mirrors and backup devices that detect and warn of the presence of children; and sensing/ warning devices that alert adult drivers and passengers when children are left in the vehicle:

(The uniform child restraint anchorage, or LATCH system, now required in new cars, should be explored as a potential location for a weight sensor: if a child were left in the child safety seat, a warning buzzer would alert the driver that the child was still in the seat and should be removed.)

## Other

**There should continue to be a group in California, similar in makeup to the Unattended Kids + Cars Expert Panel that meets at least once a year to identify areas where injuries and deaths of children associated with motor vehicles are increasing beyond normal standards.** This group would identify situations that require more focus and research, create teams to assess and make recommendations on how best to minimize those injuries and deaths, and monitor established programs to see if mitigation strategies are effective. Future recommendations from this group would be forwarded annually to appropriate state agencies, the NHTSA and auto company representatives, with a request to discuss the issue, share data and work together to reduce the incidences of leaving children unattended in and around motor vehicles.



# Unattended Kids + Cars Expert Panel Participants

## Chair

**Janette E. Fennell,**

Cofounder/Executive Director, KIDS 'N CARS

## Moderators

**Elizabeth McLoughlin, ScD,**

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**Greig Fennell,** Fennell & Associates

## Ex Officio Members

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## Panel Members

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## Guests

**Tammy Russell,** Cofounder,

4 R Kids Sake, and Kaitlyn Marie Russell's Mom

**Laura Petersen,** Cofounder, 4 R Kids Sake,

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