

Bay Area accidents highlight importance of children's safety around vehicles

By Paul Bugarino Contra Costa Times Posted: 01/01/2012 12:00:00 AM PST

It's hard to fathom how a young child can be accidentally killed outside his home by a loved one, but such tragedies happen more often than people might think.

Two Bay Area accidents in three days involving parents striking their children with vehicles in front of their homes -- including the death of an Antioch toddler last week -- seems like an anomaly. However, statistics show vehicular tragedies happen on a fairly routine basis.

At least 50 children are backed over in driveways and parking lots every week in the United States, and two of them die, according to national nonprofit child advocacy group KidsAndCars.org. About 64 percent of non-traffic child car deaths are caused by vehicles running into kids; other causes include children left in hot cars and strangulation by power windows.

"They are pretty much constant. Young children are always going to follow their impulses. They have no idea they're putting themselves in harm's way," said Janette Fennell, founder of KidsAndCars.org.

About seven in every 10 accidents are caused by relatives, usually a parent.

"In the short time it takes to look down to fasten a seat belt or look at a cellphone, a child can run behind daddy's SUV and daddy thinks they're in the house," she said.

Parents assume the child cannot figure out how to open the door, but somehow they find their way outside, said Fennell.

Some kids even get out through a dog door, she said.

Malcolm Norris, who would have turned 2 this week, ran behind his father's pickup on the afternoon of Dec. 26 as it backed out of a parking space in the cul-de-sac where the family lived.

All indications are that it was a tragic accident, police said.

Two days earlier, a Vallejo mother was pulling into her garage near Marshfield Road and Ashden Lane when she felt a bump. The mother found she had hit her 3-year-old daughter.

"I wondered myself a little bit if we were seeing more because of the madness of Christmas," said Bonnie Lovette, injury prevention coordinator for the trauma services unit of Children's Hospital Oakland. "Unfortunately, these accidents happen all the time."

As of Thursday, Children's Hospital had admitted 11 children into intensive care in 2011 for non-traffic injuries, but the total is higher because not all cases are classified as such, Lovette said. The 2011 number was slightly fewer than the hospital's yearly average, she said.

Two of the victims who were taken to Children's Hospital in 2011 died -- last week's tragedy in Antioch and a January accident in which a 1-year-old Oakland girl was struck and killed by a truck driven by her uncle as he backed into a driveway.

"It seems to happen to any type of family at any time," Lovette said.

The tragedies prompted KidsAndCars.org to seek federal legislation requiring cameras in the back of vehicles to eliminate blind areas.

Often, drivers cannot see what is directly behind their car.

"We've heard of it referred to as the blind spot, but there's a whole blind zone where drivers can't see what's behind their car," Fennell said.

A driver who stands 5-foot-8 has a blind zone of 13 feet in a sedan, and that same driver has a 19-foot blind zone in a large sports-utility vehicle, according to Consumer Reports.

Pickup trucks, such as the one that ran over Malcolm, have a blind zone of about 24 feet.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration promised that by the end of 2011 it would establish rear-visibility requirements for all new cars, Fennell said. Those rules would be phased in over the next three years, starting with cars built in 2012.

It's assumed that most cars would meet that standard by adding rearview cameras, Fennell said.

The cameras could save hundreds of lives a year, Fennell said.

Along with the new technology, Lovette points to parental supervision as a key to preventing these tragedies.

"It's all about continuity and closeness. Any time the risk increases, you must know where your child is -- even if you have the other parent show you 'here he is,' " Lovette said.

Safety Tips

- Walk all the way around and look behind a vehicle before moving it.
- Know where your kids are before moving your vehicle. Make sure another adult is properly supervising children so that they do not get into the path of a moving vehicle.
- To help the driver detect an object or person behind a vehicle, consider installing devices such as rear sensors, cameras, special mirrors or lenses.
- Teach children that parked vehicles might move. Let them know that while they can see the vehicle, the driver might not see them.
- Trim the landscaping around your driveway to ensure you can see children.
- Hold a child's hand when leaving a vehicle.
- Teach your children to never play in, around or behind any vehicle.
- Set the emergency brake every time you park.

Source: Children's Hospital Oakland

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