

Forgotten baby syndrome

It seems unthinkable - accidentally leaving your baby for hours, but lots of busy parents do it with devastating consequences

By [Lorna Martin](#) PUBLISHED: 17:58 EST, 11 March 2012 UPDATED: 07:41 EST, 12 March 2012

During these hectic times, many things can slip your mind - but could you ever forget your own child? Emma Taylor, 36, from Buckinghamshire, thought it was impossible, until it happened to her. Emma, who works in recruitment, is married to Tom, 41, a TV producer, and the couple have a three-year-old son, Josh. 'Two years ago, Tom and I married in a beautiful church near our home,' says Emma. 'There was the usual flurry to get ready, and I dressed Josh up in a smart white frilly shirt and beige shorts ready to come with me to the church.



While there have been no fatal cases of Forgotten Baby Syndrome reported in the UK, campaigners are eager to prevent future tragedies

'Chattering excitedly with my bridesmaids, I got into the car. As we arrived at the church, about ten miles from my house, I suddenly had the most awful sinking feeling. I'd forgotten Josh. I was utterly panic stricken.

'Although my head was so full of the day ahead, I couldn't understand, and to this day, still can't, how I managed to forget him. I rang my brother, who was the best man and, in floods of tears, explained what had happened, told him to stall the ceremony, and ordered the driver to turn around. 'On the way home, all kinds of terrible things ran through my mind — he wasn't even left somewhere secure like a playpen. Had Josh fallen down the stairs? Or burned himself on the oven? The possibilities were endless. I unlocked the door and raced through the house. I found him, sitting quite calmly on the living room floor chewing a piece of toast.

'I clutched him to me, crying. All that ran through my mind were the awful things that could have happened to Josh in the hour he'd been left alone in the house — I was so lucky.'

Dr Karen Murphy, 40, wasn't quite so lucky. Happily married and a devoted mother to three children — Emily, 11, Abigail, nine, and two-year-old Ryan — Karen also owned a large veterinary practice. Life was good. Then, on June 17 last year, something truly nightmarish happened.

Karen drove the short distance to work, planning to drop Ryan off at nursery on the way. At around 4pm, she returned home. There, she received a panicked phone call from her husband, Mark. He was at the nursery to pick Ryan up. But Ryan wasn't there.



On trial: Dr Karen Murphy, who forgot her son was in the car

In that split second, Karen's world imploded. She realised she'd done something unimaginably awful. She sprinted to her car in the driveway and found her beloved baby, still strapped into his seat in the back. Karen, described by all who know her as a wonderful and caring mother, had forgotten to drop her son off at nursery. He'd been left in a searingly hot car for more than seven hours.

Despite frantic attempts to resuscitate him, Ryan died from heatstroke. Today, in the U.S. town of Bristow, Virginia, Karen goes on trial accused of murder and child neglect. If convicted, she could face a maximum prison sentence of 40 years.

Her husband, who is standing by her — as are their friends and extended family — says the murder charge is outrageous. He says it was a tragic accident, an inexplicable, inexcusable mistake — but not a crime.

Furthermore, Karen is in a living hell. Accidentally killing your own baby is a lifelong sentence far greater than any a court could ever deliver.

Any busy working mother who's trying to juggle too many things and always on the run will no doubt be able to relate to blanking out something important: a relative's birthday, a work deadline or meeting, a parents' evening, an anniversary. But forgetting your own child?

It is completely beyond comprehension. Yet it is happening more and more often — a tragic consequence of our frenetic lifestyles and increasingly cluttered minds. In fact, the phenomenon of leaving your child in the car has even been given a name: Forgotten baby syndrome.

The majority of known cases of Forgotten Baby Syndrome have happened in the U.S., where there have been more than 600 resulting fatalities since 1990. Yet last year, two babies died within a week of each other in Italy after their parents forgot about them.

In one of the cases, Lucio Petrizzi, a university lecturer, said he was convinced he had dropped his 22-month-old daughter Elena off at nursery, when he had actually left her in a stiflingly hot car for five hours. She was declared brain dead after an operation to reduce brain swelling, brought on by high temperatures, failed. He told police: 'I just don't know what happened. It's as if someone pulled the plug out of my brain.'

BRAIN POWER

Mums-to-be often blame forgetfulness on 'baby brain', but studies show the brain's capacity is unaltered by pregnancy

In 2010, a 40-year-old doctor was taking his son to nursery in Cyprus when he received an emergency call. He drove straight to the hospital, forgetting his five-year-old was in the car. It was only when his wife called him, eight hours later, that he realised what had happened, and his son was discovered dead in the back of the car. While there have been no fatal cases of Forgotten Baby Syndrome reported in the UK, campaigners are eager to raise awareness of this problem in the hope of preventing future tragedies. They are also keen to point out that it does not require soaring temperatures for a tragedy to happen.

In one case, the day's high was only 18.5c. And, in colder climates, there is the risk of hypothermia. Janette Fennell, president of kidsandcars.org, an organisation working to prevent injuries and death to children in and around vehicles, says part of the problem is that no one ever thinks this could happen to them.

'Some people think: "I can see forgetting a child for two minutes, but not eight hours." But what they don't understand is that in his or her mind the parent has dropped off the baby at nursery and thinks the baby is well taken care of. 'Once that's in your brain, there is no reason to worry for the rest of the day.

She adds that there are no hard and fast rules about the type of person who is likely to fall victim to Forgotten Baby Syndrome. Often, working mothers are demonised, but the figures show it has actually happened to more fathers than mothers, and also to a grandmother and to mothers who don't work.

Fennell adds: 'They tend to be the doting parents, the kind who buy baby locks and safety gates. These cases are failures of memory, not of love.' The rise in the number of cases is due partly to car seats being placed in the back rather than the front of vehicles and making them rear-facing, for safety reasons.

However, campaigners also believe it is caused by stress and trying to juggle too much. Researchers have found several factors, such as sleep deprivation, marital problems and certain medications can affect the prefrontal cortex, which is one of the most critical parts of the brain used for multi-tasking. If you're feeling exhausted and are trying to juggle too many things, your brain is less likely to be able to handle multiple demands.

TWO CHILDREN FORGOTTEN IN CHUCK E. CHEESE IN ONE WEEK



Forgetting your own child is completely beyond comprehension.

Yet it is happening more and more often — a tragic consequence of our frenetic lifestyles and increasingly cluttered minds.

A five-year-old girl was left at a Chuck E. Cheese in Texas after her own birthday party last week and her mother only realized she was missing the next morning.

Just a few days earlier, a three-year-old was left behind by her parents at a different branch in Bel Air, Maryland.

Restaurant workers only knew that the girl, identified only as Harmony, was in need of help when she went up to a restaurant worker around 8.30pm Monday night saying that she was thirsty.

Her parents realized they had forgotten her when they saw a report about her on the evening news.

Given the accidental nature of the incident, the police do not expect that any charges will be filed in the case.

Numerous studies have shown that our stressful, busy lifestyles are causing more forgetfulness. It's just that no one ever thinks this absent-mindedness could extend to their own baby. That certainly applied to Lyn Balfour, 40, who has served as an intelligence officer in Bosnia and Iraq. On March 30, 2007, a 'perfect storm' of stress factors changed everything. Her nine-month-old son Bryce had a bad cold.

She'd been up most of the night trying to settle him. The next morning she was exhausted — as was Bryce who, uncharacteristically, fell asleep in the car on the way to the childminder's. Her husband's vehicle was out of action and, as a result, Bryce was in a different car seat, and not visible in Lyn's rear-view mirror. Lyn also dropped her husband, who usually drove himself, at his workplace and thinks this put a subconscious check mark in her brain: drop-off done.

For whatever reason, she drove right past Bryce's childminder to her office. Although she and the childminder exchanged missed calls during the day, neither thought anything was wrong and didn't actually speak until 4pm as Lyn was leaving her office. The childminder asked after Bryce. Lyn said: 'What do you mean? He's with you.' Upon hearing he wasn't, Lyn asked if her husband had already picked him up. The childminder kept saying: 'Lyn, he's not here. You didn't drop him off today.'

'At first, I didn't understand,' Lyn recalls. 'Then I ran to the car. The morning was flashing through my mind. I was thinking: "I did drop him off. I know I dropped him off."'

But then, through the window, she saw her baby strapped into his seat. His eyes were closed and there was no sign of life. Lyn was hysterical. She screamed for someone to call an ambulance and started doing CPR. 'I knew in my heart it was too late, but I was just desperately trying to save him,' she says. Like Karen Murphy, Lyn was charged with murder, later reduced to involuntary manslaughter, child abuse and neglect.

She was acquitted on all counts after the jury was played recordings from two audiotapes. One was her interrogation by police in the hospital about an hour after Bryce's death. In it, she is heard sobbing: 'I killed my baby. Oh God, I'm so sorry.' The second was the call made by a passer-by to the emergency services. In the background, there is what was described as the 'unendurable' sound of Lyn shrieking as she tried to resuscitate her baby.

Lyn, who also lives in Virginia, now campaigns to raise awareness of Forgotten Baby Syndrome. 'I had heard about this happening to other people and I thought it was crazy,' she says. 'I thought there was no way it could ever happen to me.'

She encourages people to try to protect themselves against something similar happening to them. For example by making an agreement with a child's nursery or carer to call if there is an unexplained absence, or to always put a visual clue such as a changing bag on the passenger seat.

'No one ever thinks this could happen to them,' she says. 'But the truth is we are all vulnerable. We are all capable of making a fatal mistake.'

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2113440/Forgotten-baby-syndrome-It-unthinkable--accidentally-leaving-baby-hours-lots-busy-parents-devastating-consequences.html#ixzz1ovF8Q5EG>