

Lee's Summit toddler who died had been left in car all day

Forgotten boy was in backseat all day. Such tragedies "more common than people realize."

By GLENN E. RICE The Kansas City Star Updated: 2012-05-05 T04:28:48Z

A Lee's Summit teacher headed home from school Thursday afternoon suddenly realized she had never dropped off her 13-month-old son at day care that morning.

Still strapped in his car seat in the back, the boy wasn't breathing. His mother and emergency personnel were unable to revive him.

Such a tragedy has played out at least 613 times nationwide since 1991, said Sue Auriemma, vice president of Kids and Cars, a Leawood-based nonprofit group that tracks cases of children who die in hot vehicles.

It usually occurs with new parents who see a sudden change in their routine brought on with the arrival of a baby, she said. A vast majority of such deaths involve children age 3 or younger. Parents are overcome with stress and fatigue.

"No one is immune to this type of tragedy because all of our brains fail us at one point or another," said Auriemma, whose agency offers tips on how to prevent such events. "It is not for a lack of caring on the parents' part, so a parent should not be judged, because it has to do with a failure of the brain to not work properly."

On Friday, Lee's Summit authorities said they had completed the initial phase of their investigation, which revealed no signs of foul play.

It appears the mother mistakenly believed that she had dropped the boy off at day care on the way to work, police said. She discovered him inside the car on the way home, about 4:30 p.m., and pulled over near Southwest Winterpark Boulevard and Southwest Wintercreek Drive, about five blocks from Cedar Creek Elementary, where she teaches. Her husband works at another Lee's Summit school.

It may take up to eight weeks for police to complete their investigation, said Sgt. Chris Depue, a police spokesman.

On Friday, the Jackson County Medical Examiner's Office was assisting investigators to determine the cause of death.

The outside air temperature reached the low 80s on Thursday afternoon. Police said they did not know how high the temperature climbed inside the woman's vehicle, but researchers have noted it doesn't take long for it to top 100 degrees on an 80-degree day.

In warm weather, a vehicle can warm to life-threatening levels in just 10 minutes, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

One way to help prevent parents from forgetting children in backseat car seats is to use a teddy bear, according to Kids and Cars. Leave the bear in the child seat when the seat is not in use. After putting a child in the seat, place the teddy bear in the front passenger seat, where the driver can see it as a reminder of who is riding in back.

The group also recommends putting a cellphone, purse, briefcase or another important item on the floor in front of the child's car seat so the driver has to retrieve the item — and see the child.

Parents also should have a system with their day care provider, who can contact them if the parent does not call them or if the child does not arrive at a certain time, Auriemma said.

"This is not about being a so-called good or bad parent," she said. "This type of incident where a parent unknowingly leaves a child in a vehicle is far more common than people realize."

Cedar Creek school officials on Friday sent a letter about the incident home with students.

"Sharing this heartbreaking news and leading our school family toward a healthy acceptance of this tragic event are tasks that lay ahead of us," the letter said.

Counselors would be made available to speak with students, and a substitute teacher was filling in, the letter said.

"Together, we will make it through this most difficult of times," it said.

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<http://www.kansascity.com/2012/05/04/3593949/dead-lees-summit-toddler-had-been.html#storylink=cpy>