

National campaign works to stop child car deaths

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WASHINGTON - Sweltering hot cars kill on average one child every nine days, prompting the federal government to take up a skyrocketing problem in which distracted, yet loving parents are often to blame.

"The biggest mistake that anybody can make is thinking that 'how can anybody forget their child?' Anyone can do it. It could happen to me," said David Strickland, the administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration or NHTSA.

NHTSA launched a new, national campaign this spring working with hospitals to test aftermarket safety devices to remind drivers their baby is in the backseat. [The agency is also raising awareness with online and radio ads.](#)

"I robbed him of his life," said Lyn Balfour, who applauds more widespread education efforts to curb the problem. Balfour is to blame for the death of her 9-month-old son Bryce five years ago due to heatstroke in her own car. Balfour, who is pregnant with her fifth child, was supposed to drop Bryce off with the babysitter just like any other day. But a sleepless night, a change in routine and a phone call from work quickly contributed to a catastrophic mistake.

"I turned into instant work mode, and as I was on the phone I passed by where I would normally turn to drop him off," she said. The high temperature outside was only 66 degrees.

The horrific tragedy is also getting attention on Capitol Hill. The Senate included provisions in its transportation bill to help curb a tragedy that has taken the lives of more than 500 children in the last 14 years. The legislation calls for a driver alert system and rear seatbelt reminders.

Since 1997, there have been 20 heat-related child deaths in Green Country -- 10 in Tulsa alone. At least 13 of those cases involved parents leaving their children.

"Ninety percent of who this happens to are upstanding citizens," said Jeannette Fennell, who runs [Kidsandcars.org](#), a non-profit that advocates for child safety in cars. "The biggest thing people should watch out for is change in routine," she added.

"It was always my responsibility to bring the baby in," said Justin Marson. But a miscommunication between Justin and Jessica Marson of Manceta, Calif., combined with a change in routine, like Balfour, led to the unimaginable nearly four years ago.

"We each thought the other had brought Sara inside the house," he said. Instead, 9-month-old SaraCorinne spent the next three hours trapped inside the family van. The temperature that day topped 90 degrees. Doctors gave her three days to live. SaraCorinne survived. But today at four years old, she can't walk, talk or feed herself -- a reminder that her parents must face each and every day.

"We have a loss regardless of her still being alive. There's great loss," said Jessica Marson.

Both mothers faced legal battles for their tragic mistakes. Marson was charged with felony child abuse and neglect. Balfour went to trial for involuntary manslaughter. Both were eventually cleared of any wrongdoing. While Balfour and the Marsons rely heavily on faith to help them through their lives, the two families say they will always face a lifetime of grief and guilt.

"It never gets better. It never goes away. It's something that's always there," Balfour said.

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