

Child deaths in hot cars target of awareness campaign

Posted: 05/24/2012 KRISTIN VOLK Scripps Howard News Service



When she was 9 months old, SaraCorinne Marson's brothers said a prayer for her recovery. (SHNS photo by Jessica Marson)

RUCKERSVILLE, Va. - No parent wants to live with the guilt and grief of leaving a child to die in a hot car. For Raelyn Balfour of Ruckersville, Va., "It's something that's always there."

Balfour's 9-month-old son Bryce died of heatstroke March 30, 2007, when she left him in her car at work at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Bryce was one of an average of 38 children who perish trapped in vehicles every year, according to KidsandCars.org, a nonprofit organization that tracks death rates and advocates for child safety in cars.

"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 (NHTSA).

The agency has launched "Where's Baby? Look Before You Lock," a national campaign to make parents and caregivers aware of the dangers of leaving children in cars. The agency also is working with the Center for Injury Research and Prevention at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia to test safety devices that might remind drivers their baby is in the backseat. Results are expected later this summer, according to hospital spokesperson Dana Mortensen.

Balfour applauds more widespread education efforts to curb the problem. Now pregnant with her fifth child, Balfour recalls the day she had planned to drop Bryce off with his babysitter, just like she did any other morning. But a sleepless night, a change in routine and a phone call from work distracted her.

"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 that day was 66 degrees, but it was over 110 degrees in the car, she said.

"I robbed him of his life," she said.

The death of Bryce and at least 500 other U.S. children in the period from 1998 to 2011 has drawn attention on Capitol Hill. The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation included provisions in the transportation bill that it passed in March requiring NHTSA to offer guidelines for car-safety devices such as driver alert systems and rear seatbelt reminders.

"Ninety percent of who this happens to are upstanding citizens," said Janette Fennell of KidsandCars.org, based in Leawood, Kan.

"The biggest thing people should watch out for is change in routine," she added.

A change in routine, combined with a miscommunication between Justin and Jessica Marson of Manteca, Calif., led to their family tragedy on Aug. 16, 2008.

"It was always my responsibility to bring the baby in," said Justin Marson. "We each thought the other had brought Sara inside the house."

Instead, 9-month-old SaraCorinne spent three hours trapped inside the family van as temperatures rose to more than 90 degrees.

Doctors gave her three days to live.

SaraCorinne survived. But today at 4 years old, she can't walk, talk or feed herself.

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

Both mothers faced charges for their mistakes. Balfour, whose husband Jarrett took an assignment in Iraq to pay for his wife's legal bills, was tried for involuntary manslaughter. Marson was charged with felony child abuse and neglect. Both were eventually cleared of wrongdoing.

While Balfour and the Marsons say they rely heavily on faith to help them through their lives, they acknowledge they will always be haunted by their mistakes.

Balfour, who still drives the black Honda Pilot in which her son died, said, the grief "never gets better. It never goes away."

KidsAndCars.org offered some safety tips for parents and caregivers:

- Never leave children alone in or around cars, even for a minute.
- Put something you'll need, like your cellphone, handbag, employee ID or brief case, etc., on the floorboard in the backseat.
- Get in the habit of always opening the back door of your vehicle every time you reach your destination to make sure no child has been left behind. This will soon become a habit.
- Keep a large stuffed animal in the child's car seat when it's not occupied. When the child is placed in the seat, put the stuffed animal in the front passenger seat. It's a visual reminder that anytime the stuffed animal is up front you know the child is in the backseat in a child-safety seat.
- Make arrangements with your child's day care center or babysitter that you will always call if your child will not be there on a particular day as scheduled.
- Keep vehicles locked at all times -- even in the garage or driveway -- and always set your parking brake.
- Keys and/or remote openers should never be left within reach of children.
- Make sure all child passengers have left the vehicle after it is parked.
- When a child is missing, check vehicles and car trunks immediately.
- If you see a child alone in a vehicle, get involved. If they are hot or seem sick, get them out as quickly as possible. Call 911 or your local emergency number immediately.
- Be especially careful about keeping children safe in and around cars during busy times, schedule changes and periods of crisis or holidays.
- Use drive-thru services when available at restaurants, banks, pharmacies, dry cleaners, etc.
- Use your debit or credit card to pay for gas at the pump.

Copyright 2012 Scripps Media, Inc. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

<http://www.kypost.com/dpp/news/national/child-deaths-in-hot-cars-target-of-awareness-campaign1337856714464>