Technology won't solve kids-in-car death problem anytime soon

Omar L. Gallaga, Digital Savant Updated: 5:25 a.m. Monday, July 30, 2012Published: 9:27 p.m. Sunday, July 29, 2012

Charlie Riedel/2004 Associated Press - Kids and Cars President Janette Fennell, with her children Noah, 5, right, and Alex, 9, has successfullly lobbied the government to require safer power window switches on cars.

They're horrific stories, difficult to read and get your mind around. No one would blame you for ignoring them.

But they come every year, the news articles about children who died of heatstroke after being left in cars.

In 2010, the number of U.S. children who died this way climbed to an all-time high: 49, according to Kids and Cars, a Kansas City, Mo.-based nonprofit advocacy group that tracks such data.

Last year, 33 U.S. children died, many of them left behind by otherwise careful, loving parents in a moment of distraction.

Cars can alert you if you leave your lights on or don't wear your front seat belt, but are silent if a child has been left unattended. The same ever-cheaper, increasingly ubiquitous technology that powers our cellphones, game controllers and other gadgets surely could be adapted to protect the most precious cargo a vehicle can carry. Right?

Unfortunately, advocates say, any innovation that technology could produce will run into a surprising obstacle: Many parents simply don't believe they're at risk.

'We never imagined it'

On May 25, 2011, 1-year-old Sophia Rayne Cavaliero was left in a pickup on Spicewood Springs Road when her father forgot to drop her off at day care. When her parents realized the mistake, they rushed back, but it was too late. She died shortly after at Dell Children's Medical Center.

The parents of Sophia, who was nicknamed Ray Ray, have tried to raise awareness about these deaths.

"Before our accident, we had never even imagined it's possible to forget a child in the backseat of the car," said Kristie Reeves-Cavaliero. "We never imagined it. Nobody ever talked to us about it in our parenting classes or our pediatrician visits."

They set up a website and began a project called Ray Ray's Pledge calling for parents, baby-sitters and day cares to agree to contact each other if a child doesn't show up on time or when an infant or toddler's routine is broken.

Reeves-Cavaliero says she's been approached several times about products that seek to prevent deaths like Ray Ray's.

And Janette Fennell, the president and founder of KidsAndCars, says her organization is approached "probably once a week" by inventors who believe they have a way to prevent heatstroke deaths.

"Everybody's heart is 100 percent in the right place," Fennell said, "They see these things happening; they understand how devastating it is to the family and they want to help."

But, she says, most of the products never make it to the market. Either they're never built or the makers can't market a product that, ironically, parents don't believe they need.

"There's been a tremendous amount of push-back from the public and others that think we don't need the technology," Fennell said. "They think the parents (who leave children in cars) are stupid."

Even engineers from NASA's Langley Research Center in Virginia tried their hand with a product called Child Presence Sensor, which was developed after a fellow staffer's child died of heatstroke in the center's parking lot.

The keychain product was first touted in 2002 and featured on the "Today" show. But parents still can't buy it or have it installed on a new car. Fennell says that the product works, but inventors could not find a commercial partner to make it widely available. And marketing such a product to parents who don't think they would ever leave a child behind in a car, she says, would be difficult.

A car seat from Tomy, the First Years IAlert, will be out this year. It will include a temperature sensor and can alert parents by phone if the child is left behind. It can even tell if the car seat is installed incorrectly.

Technology is there

After the Cavalieros met with one inventor, Rodney Traylor, a 39-year-old reserve peace officer who does warehouse work for Austin tech company Flextronics, they wrote a letter of support.

With his father, a former IBM techie named Howard Traylor, Rodney Traylor developed Solar Cooling System for Automobile, which he hopes a car company or after-market manufacturer will engineer and mass market.

Using solar panels, it would activate a cooling system independent of the car's air conditioning that could also use a cell signal to alert authorities or parents if a child is left behind. It would include a seat pressure sensor and could also be used as a luxury item for pre-cooling a car remotely.

"The technology is already there; it's just putting it together," Rodney Traylor said. So far, the Traylors have created a virtual prototype (a 3-D animated representation), but no working model of the technology yet exists on a car.

"It seems very promising," Reeves-Cavaliero said. "The downside is that it's several years down the road."

Fennell hopes that a Department of Transportation bill passed in June will lead the way to more preventative technology. It mandates backseat sensors for seat belts, which could perhaps lead to piggyback tech to detect kids left in cars, Fennell says. It also requires more stringent data collection on these deaths.

Fennell says the most direct technological solution would be requiring auto companies to incorporate safety features to detect a child left in a car seat and to send an alert when that happens. But auto companies have been resistant to adding costs to cars, and efforts to get such a law passed have failed, she said.

Parents, Fennell says, won't necessarily buy products to prevent these kinds of accidents if they're sold separately.

"People tend to be reluctant to purchase something they don't think they'll ever need," Fennell said. "Thinking this could never happen to you is the worst mistake anyone could ever, ever make. By the time they need it, it's too late."

Before it's too late

When my first daughter was a few months old, the American-Statesman reported the story of a baby who died after being left in a car. A co-worker begged me to make sure that didn't happen to me.

I was sure that it couldn't, but looking back now, I wonder. I was sleep-deprived, stressed as a new parent and was commuting nearly an hour each way to an Austin day care with my napping baby in tow. Once, I accidentally locked my infant daughter, who was sleeping in a car carrier, in a work conference room. A co-worker ran to get security to unlock the door, but it was one of probably dozens of mental lapses I had in that first year of parenting.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning story that ran in the Washington Post in 2009 with the headline "Fatal Distraction" convinced me that it could happen to any parent. Commenters on news websites often disagree; some blame the parents for negligence and call for prison time or worse.

It's hot outside and getting hotter. The horrible stories will keep coming.

Three have taken place in Texas already this year, two of them in July. "No other state has as many heatstroke deaths," Fennell said.

Even if a miracle technological cure suddenly appears, it will be a long time — perhaps five to 10 years — before it's standard in cars or car seats, something Reeves-Cavaliero says she's fully aware of.

"In the meantime, kids are still dying."

Contact Omar L. Gallaga at ogallaga@statesman.com or 445-3672 Twitter: @omarg

---

Child heatstroke deaths in Texas

This year, three Texas children have died in vehicles due to heatstroke: 3-year-old Benjamin Price in Dallas and a 2-month-old in Brazoria County in July, and 7-month-old Luke Jacobson in Sugar Land in May.

In 2011, eight Texas children died of vehicular heatstroke, including Sophia Cavaliero, 1, in Austin and 6-month-old Mya Wallace in New Braunfels.

In 2010, when 49 such deaths were reported nationwide, 12 were in Texas.

http://www.statesman.com/life/technology-wont-solve-kids-in-car-death-problem-2424489.html?viewAsSinglePage=true