

Tech fix to prevent deaths of kids left in cars a frustrating challenge

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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-based nonprofit advocacy group that tracks the phenomenon.

Last year, 33 U.S. children died, many of them left behind by otherwise careful, loving parents in a moment of distraction. This year, so far: 15.

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

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

On May 25, 2011, 1-year-old Sophia Rayne Cavaliero was left in a pickup in Austin 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.

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 think they need.

"There's been a tremendous amount of pushback 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, but parents still can't buy it or have it installed on a new car. Fennell says that while the product works, the inventors could not find a commercial partner to make it widely available.

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