

I, too, left my child in a hot car

By Sunny Hostin updated 10:16 AM EDT, Thu June 26, 2014 Source: [CNN](#)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Justin Ross Harris' toddler son died, left in a hot car while Harris went to work
- Sunny Hostin left her baby in a car on a hot day, but quickly realized it and ran back
- Children die every year from being left in hot cars by mistake; 44 died in 2013
- Hostin: If it was a mistake, Harris should not face charges. Anguish will be punishment

Editor's note: Sunny Hostin is CNN's legal analyst. The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Sunny Hostin.

(CNN) -- I left my daughter in my car on a hot summer day. It was in July 2007, and I remember that day as if it were yesterday.

My husband and I drove to Home Depot. I wanted to buy herbs for my new garden. He wanted to buy power tools. Our 5-year-old son stayed behind with my mother, but we decided to bring our 14-month-old baby girl along. She was cranky that day, and a car ride always soothed her and made her fall asleep.



Warrant: Father visited hot car at lunch

We strapped her into a rear-facing baby seat -- they're safer. We parked, turned off the ignition, closed the sun roof tight and locked the doors. I went to get a shopping cart while my husband stood by the car waiting. We then walked together past the car and toward the crowded Home Depot.

Walking into the garden center, my husband turned to me and said: "My God. We left Paloma in the car." I screamed, dropped my purse, ran to the car and opened the door. The car was already warm. Her face already flushed. But she was fine and still sleeping. I was ashamed, embarrassed and horrified at what I had done.

It dawned on me immediately -- I could have killed my girl.

But the son of Justin Ross Harris, [22-month-old Cooper](#), did die. Harris left Cooper in a hot car, strapped to his rear-facing seat in Atlanta last week, when he went into work at a Home Depot corporate office, according to a Cobb County criminal warrant.

Witnesses describe Harris' reaction as very distressed, as he repeatedly asked: "What have I done?" But investigators have implied that this might have been premeditated. Police are still investigating, but Harris has pleaded not guilty to charges of child cruelty and felony murder. If he is convicted, he could spend the rest of his life in prison.

But what if this was just a tragic accident -- the type of accident that happens every single year? [In 2013, 44 children died](#) from vehicle-induced heat stroke. About 450 children in the U.S. [have died this way since 1998](#).

"It's reasonable to call this an epidemic," says memory expert David Diamond, a scientist at the Veterans' Hospital in Tampa, Florida, who is often consulted on such cases. "It happens, on average, once a week from spring to early fall." Parents everywhere are talking about the Harris tragedy -- in restaurants, in homes and on social media -- and many want him prosecuted even if this was an accident.

On Facebook, Matthew Leahla Wierson writes: "If he's not punished for his gross negligence, then that sends a get-out-of-jail-free card to all parents who are evil and want to murder their children."

Stephanie Lowry writes: "It's beyond me how ANY parent can forget their baby in a car! I was 15 when I had my first son and NEVER managed to even ALMOST forget either one of my THREE boys! EVER!"



Sunny Hostin

Before I left Paloma in that hot car, I would have agreed with Matthew and Stephanie. I would have said that you must prosecute even those parents who leave their kids in a hot car accidentally because you must send a message to parents that they have an obligation to protect their children.

Before I left Paloma in that hot car, I would have said that the anguish that this parent would feel is not enough of a punishment. Had you asked me about one of these cases, I would have told you that I am a watchful mother and would never, ever do that.

But I left her. My husband did, too.

If Justin Harris left his son accidentally, he should not face charges. Period. How can you prosecute a parent for accidentally leaving a child in a car? There is no crime. There is no intent. And trust me, his anguish will be punishment enough.

I punish myself all the time for leaving my girl in that car for a few minutes. So I'm reserving judgment on this one. I need more facts. Is there a history of abuse? A bitter divorce and custody battle? Internet searches for how to kill a child? Is there evidence of intent -- or was this the case of a hardworking, harried, watchful, loving, adoring, protective parent who made a horrible mistake?

I hope by coming forward, I have prevented another parent from saying the words that are so hard for me to say: "I left my child in a car on a hot summer day."

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/25/opinion/hostin-hot-car-child/>