

'It will never happen to me'

Child safety organization advocates look before you lock mentality in wake of recent car deaths

BY TORIANO PORTER tporter@lsjournal.com July 2, 2014

Average number of heat-related vehicle deaths per year involving children ages five days to 14-years-old recorded in the United States from 1998-2013.

The summer months often serves as a reminder for parents with young children: Look and double check infant car seats before locking the doors to your vehicle.

According to national statistics collected by Kids and Cars, 38 children ages five days to 14-years-old died in cars each year from 1998-2013 due to heat-related causes; an average of one every nine days.

So far this year, 12 children have died due to vehicular heat stroke. Forty-four heat-related infant deaths were recorded in 2013.

The subject of vehicular heat stroke was once again brought to the forefront after a Georgia father was charged in June with felony murder and child cruelty after he initially told authorities that he forgot to drop his 22-month-old son off at a day care and left him in his car in the office parking lot.

Although the investigation into the Georgia case led to criminal charges, most infant deaths related to vehicular heat stroke are accidental. In fact, an accidental heat stroke death occurred in Lee's Summit in 2012 after a 1-year-old child's mother unintentionally left him inside her car while she was at work.

Statistics provided by Kids and Cars show more than half of the 717 child vehicular heatstroke deaths recorded from 1991 through last year were caused by parents forgetting their child was in the back of the car.

According to Amber Rollins, director of Kids and Cars, there are several factors that contribute to children being inadvertently forgotten by caregivers, including a change in one's normal routine, lack of sleep, stress, fatigue, distractions and hormone changes.

"Anybody who has a new baby can tell you you've got a thousand things you're worried about," Rollins said. "Especially if you're working parents. You're working, you have a baby, you aren't getting enough sleep, you've got all of this stress and your brain just can't function like it normally would."

Lee's Summit Police Sgt. Chris Depue said the department doesn't do much outreach to remind parents not to leave kids in vehicles; however they offer car seat installations for citizens and have certified car seat technicians who do the installs. The technicians also provide education to make sure parents install the seats correctly.

"The department has three certified car seat installation technicians that do car seat installations by appointment at the police department," Depue said in an email to the *Journal*. "The technicians work with parents to show them the correct installation of the seats and to make sure that the seat is not subject to any safety recalls. The police department as well as several area fire departments conducts the installations as an educational resource to help keep kids in our community safe."

Rollins said the organization encourages car seat education in communities but warned that young children – especially babies – often fall asleep in their rear-facing car seats, which looks the same from the front seat whether occupied or not.

"We refer parents to our 'Look Before You Lock' program," Rollins said. "That consists of 'Look Before You Lock' education cards that are printed and distributed to hospital birthing centers. The cards help parents understand how under the right circumstance any good, loving, responsible parent could actually, unknowingly, leave their child behind in a vehicle.

"A majority of people think this happens to bad parents; that there is no possible way they could ever leave their child behind without knowing it. What we tell people is absolutely the worst thing a parent could do is say 'it will never happen to me.'"

For more information on Kids and Cars and the Look Before You Lock program, visit www.kidsandcars.org.

<http://www.lsjournal.com/2014/07/02/118467/it-will-never-happen-to-me.html?sp=/99/100/101/>