

Should the government step in to prevent hot car deaths?

POSTED 1:33 PM, JULY 10, 2014, BY [CNN WIRES](#)



(CNN) — While the case of the Georgia father accused of intentionally leaving his toddler son to die in a hot car continues to grip the nation, it has also sparked a debate about whether more could be done to prevent the accidental deaths of children from heatstroke inside a car.

Is it an issue for the automakers to tackle voluntarily? Should the federal government mandate a driver-reminder alert? Is it solely a matter of parental responsibility? Those are just some of the questions parents across the country, experts and public officials are asking.

Today, in most new cars, you hear an alert if a driver or passenger is not wearing a seat belt or if you leave the key in the ignition when you get out of the vehicle.

Beginning in 2018, another major safety feature will become a requirement. Under a final rule issued earlier this year by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, all new cars will be required to have rear-visibility technology. More than 200 people — 31% of them children under 5 — are killed annually in “unintentional backing” incidents, according to the government agency.

The national nonprofit KidsAndCars.org is one of the organizations that helped get the rear visibility standard passed by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2008.

Change has come slowly, said Janette Fennell, the group’s founder, noting that it has taken six years since the president’s signature for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to issue the final rule, and it will take four more years for the standard to be fully in effect.

“We won’t have 100% of our vehicles meeting the rear visibility standard until 2018, and ... you know the numbers of how many people are going to be killed and injured,” said Fennell, who created her organization after she and her husband were kidnapped and locked in their trunk while their 10-month-old child was taken somewhere else.

They managed to escape and find their baby, who was also unharmed, but the experience led to the creation of KidsAndCars.org. The group’s first victory was a regulation that all new cars beginning in 2002 include a trunk release that glows visibly in the dark interior of a car trunk.

“We do not know of one fatality in the trunk of a car that has that little release,” she said in an interview.

Fennell and her organization have been following the issue of children dying from heatstroke in cars for more than a decade. At least 44 children died from child vehicular heatstroke in 2013, according to her agency. She believes the technology exists today that could dramatically save lives.

“You can’t buy a car (today) that doesn’t turn your headlights off for you or remind you to turn off your headlights,” said Fennell, who argues these changes in cars show that the auto industry knows people are human and will forget to do things like turn off the car’s lights.

“And the question just begging to be answered is, who has decided it’s more important not to have a dead car battery than a dead baby? And I don’t say that to be harsh or sensational. It’s just a fact.”

NHTSA: Technology not “there yet”

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration did a study, as CNN reported back in 2012, and concluded that the devices that existed at that time to try to reduce infant heatstroke deaths were not reliable enough.

“In fact, we recommend against people relying on the products ... to protect their most precious cargo,” said David Friedman, the agency’s acting administrator, in an interview.

Friedman said while the agency was able to conclude that rear visibility technology can protect children and adults from back-over incidents, the technology to protect children and adults from heatstroke “just doesn’t seem to be there yet.”

“‘Yet’ is an important word there,” said Friedman, who says his agency continues to evaluate new technologies.

The focus now, says Friedman, is on making sure people follow some simple safety tips that, if followed, can reduce infant car heatstroke by 100%: tips such as “look before you lock,” or put a reminder in the back of your car such as your

cell phone, pocketbook or briefcase — something you just wouldn't leave your car without — to remind you that you have a child in the back seat.

Another tip is to always lock your car and keep the keys out of reach, since about 30% of fatalities from vehicular heatstroke come from children who decided to play in the car, said Friedman. He said another 20% of the deaths come from people who knowingly left their kids in the car, thinking they would be gone only a short time.

"The sad reality is ... all it takes is a few minutes for the temperature inside a vehicle to turn deadly," said Friedman. States across the country aren't waiting for the federal government or the auto industry to step in, and are calling for new laws on the books. Nineteen states currently make it illegal to leave a child unattended in a vehicle, according to KidsAndCars.org. Two of those states are doing more: A new law in Tennessee now protects bystanders who break into a hot car to rescue a child from being held liable for damages, and in Connecticut, there is a push to stiffen penalties for leaving a child unattended in a car.

Parents: Mixed opinions on role of government

Has awareness of the problem and a desire to do more to prevent these deaths risen to a level where there is a demand for a government mandate?

In conversations with parents across the country, there's a real difference of opinion.

Janis Brett Elspas, a mom of four in Los Angeles, thinks we need a government-required alert signal to prevent people from forgetting children in cars.

"The problem is, like wearing a seat belt itself, people still ignore the warning light (and) sound that appears on their dashboard," added Elspas, founder of the blog Mommy Blog Expert. Government-mandated education of parents is also needed, she said.

Julie DeNeen, a mom of three in Clinton, Connecticut, thinks the government should require that car seats come outfitted with a technology to alert the driver that a child is still there when the car stops, just as the government already sets guidelines on height and weight restrictions for a car seat and use of a 5-point harness.

"No one argues about the government setting the specifications for a car seat," said DeNeen. "It would be a small effort on the part of the company and make a big impact on children's lives."

Cynthia Lieberman, co-founder of CyberWise.org, a site focused on helping parents, educators and children use digital media safely, thinks the government could put guidelines in place for in-car child safety monitoring tools, guidelines the auto industry would be required to follow.

"Adults should have the option to use the car manufacturer's device or select their own monitoring system," she said, pointing to one device, a Cars-N-Kids car seat monitor that sends an alert to your smart phone if the car seat is too hot or cold, or the child gets out of the seat.

But on the other side are many voices that say this is not an issue for the government.

"Honestly, people need to slow down and focus," said Rhonda Woods, a mom of three in New Milford, Connecticut, who says the topic has sparked a big discussion in her house for the past week.

"There is no need to be so engrossed in our phones or our own minds that we lose touch with those around us, very specifically, our kids."

Laura Beyer, a mom of two grown children in West Allis, Wisconsin, and blogger for the local newspaper's website, agrees. "I would hate to have the government intervene on such basic parenting skills," she said. "I can bet \$1 million that parents remember to grab their cell phones, purses and such, but how the heck can they forget a human being they claim to love?"

Other parents think voluntary technology that parents can choose is a better solution.

"It should be an add-on option that when purchasing a car, a buyer can choose," said David LeRoy, a father of two boys in Chicago, who created a Facebook group for African-American fathers last year.

To others, the larger issue, which government regulation and technology can't really impact, is parents who knowingly leave their children in cars and don't realize the dangers of such an act.

Elizabeth Flora Ross, a mom of a 5-year-old in Jacksonville, Florida, and a former marketing executive turned freelance writer, recently witnessed and wrote about a case of a baby left in a hot car in her community. Thankfully, the baby was OK.

When she asked her Facebook followers how many people have left their kids in cars, she was surprised by not just the number of parents who admitted they had, but how they didn't feel there is anything wrong with it.

"Perhaps regulation would make parents think twice. ... But I believe the key lies in building awareness of the dangers and working to change attitudes and behaviors."

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