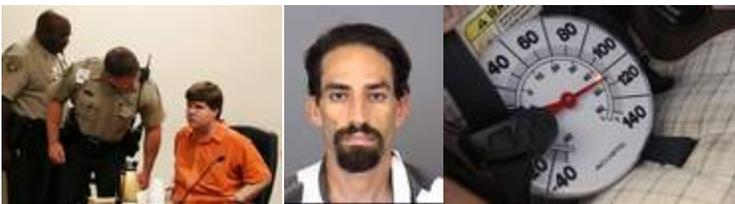


# Cases of children dying in cars raise concerns

[Jay Meisel | Highlands Today](#) Published: July 10, 2014



According to safety advocacy group KidsAndCars.org, 44 kids died of heat stroke in hot cars in 2013, most of which occurring when parents forgot their children were in the car. The group suggests leaving an important item, like a purse or cell phone, in the back seat as a reminder. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN PELHAM/STAFF



SEBRING — When Christopher King arrived home in Highlands County during a day in September 2012, he entered his house and soon went to sleep in his bedroom.

The only problem was that he left his 2-year-old daughter, Amelia, in the car. By the time she was discovered hours later, it was too late to save her life.

Prosecutors contended that King, who earlier this year plead guilty to aggravated manslaughter of a child and received a 20-year-sentence, was under the influence of illegal drugs when he left his child in the car.

King's case has similarities to dozens of cases that occur each year involving children who die of heat stroke after being left in a car on a hot day.

But the recent case in Georgia that has renewed public concern about such deaths stands apart from most or all of the others.

In that case, according to a CNN article on its website, Justin Ross Harris was charged with the murder of his 22-month-old son, who was found in Harris' SUV near where Harris worked that day. The arrest came after authorities discovered Harris had searched for information on the Internet about children dying in hot cars not long before the death of his child under the same circumstances.

If Harris purposely planned to have his child die in a hot car, that would separate the case from virtually all others where a child died under those circumstances, said Sue Auriemma, vice president of Kidsandcars.org, an organization created to reduce the number of children dying in cars.

Auriemma said she's never heard of a case where a parent purposely left their child to die in a hot vehicle.

"It's very, very disturbing if the allegations are true," she said.

In about 50 percent of the cases, she said, a parent accidentally leaves their child in a car. In another 12 percent, a parent purposely leaves the child in car, but not with the intent for the child to die. And in the remaining cases, children gain access to a vehicle, either the trunk or the seating area, and then get trapped, she said.

Highlands County authorities never alleged in the King case that King purposely left his daughter in the vehicle or that he wanted her to die.

They also did not make that allegation in the case of Adriana Alecia Espinosa, who left her daughter in an unairconditioned vehicle while she visited for two hours with her boyfriend in another vehicle that had the air conditioning on. Espinosa plead guilty last month to a charge of aggravated manslaughter of a child and is scheduled to be sentenced Sept. 15 in Highlands County Circuit Court.

While many people have commented on articles on those cases that they can't imagine how a parent could leave a child in a vehicle, Auriemma said that "the biggest mistake a parent can make is to think it can't happen to them."

In many of the cases, she said, the parents go to work, forgetting to take the child to the home of a sitter or daycare facility. They work in their office, believing the child is being taken care of at a home or daycare facility as the child was taken care of every previous working day of the year, she said.

"It's not parents who are monsters or bad people," she said. They are typically loving people who had a lapse of memory, she said.

Although such deaths occur in every state, the risk appears to be particularly great in Florida. KidsandCars.org statistics show that between 1990 and 2010, 606 children died in cars. Texas, which had 83 deaths, had the most deaths of any state, followed by Florida with 60 and California with 51. North Carolina was next with 25.

Statistics from that same period showed the increase in child deaths from deployed airbags from 1993 to 1998. As those deaths dropped after 1998 when children were placed in car seats in the back seat, the number of children being left in cars increased during most succeeding years, the statistics show.

That increase in deaths was apparently an "unintended consequence" of putting the child in the back seat, Auriemma said.

On its website, Kidsandcars.org emphasizes that doesn't in any way indicate support for putting children in the front seat.

Eventually, all vehicles many include technology that would alert a parent if a child is left in the back seat, she said.

Auriemma said parents should never leave their children in cars.

To reduce the chances of accidentally leaving a child in the car, the website recommends the following:

Parents should get in the habit of opening the back door or looking in the back every time they get out of the vehicle.

Parents should leave an item they need in the back seat.

Arrangements should be made so that a daycare provider will call the parent if the child doesn't show up.

Leave vehicle keys out of reach of children.

[jmeisel@highlandstoday.com](mailto:jmeisel@highlandstoday.com) (863)386-5834

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