

KC agencies reach out to parents to help them keep kids out of hot cars

BY BRIAN BURNES, THE KANSAS CITY STAR 08/09/2014 5:46 PM

If the Kansas City area campaign against kids being left in hot cars had a tipping point, maybe it occurred Monday night. Northland shoppers noticed a 20-month-old girl sweating in the back seat of an unlocked car. They chose to intervene by removing her and calling police.

"People are taking more responsibility," said Anne Biswell, communications coordinator for the Mother & Child Health Coalition of Kansas City.

Still, advocates say, more needs to be done to protect children from an act that kills about 30 kids a year nationwide.



The Northland intervention occurred just days after several Kansas City area child advocacy groups and public safety agencies, Biswell's among them, raised awareness about the issue as part of National Heatstroke Prevention Day.

Meanwhile, a Kansas City organization, KidsAndCars.org, has launched a separate nationwide effort through a petition on the White House "We the People" website at petitions.whitehouse.gov.

It urges the Obama administration to commit federal resources to the problem. The idea is for the Department of Transportation to spearhead the development of innovative technology that eventually would be required in all vehicles or child safety seats.

"The auto industry already knows that we are not perfect," said Janette Fennell, KidsAndCars.org founder. "You can't buy a car today that doesn't remind you to turn off your headlights or even turns them off for you.

"That begs the question — not to be harsh — but who decided that is it more important not to have a dead battery than a dead baby?"

Drivers know all about the headlights reminder, the seat belt reminder, the low fuel reminder and the door is ajar reminder.

So far, there is no kid in the back seat reminder.

The KidsAndCars.org petition needs 100,000 signatures by Tuesday. As of Saturday afternoon, it had 9,450.

If reaching the goal seems unrealistic, know that KidsAndCars.org has a track record of success.

The organization long had advocated for the transportation safety act that President George W. Bush signed in 2008. It mandated, among other measures, rearview cameras on most new vehicles to prevent small children from being injured or killed by vehicles backing up.

In March, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration announced that such equipment would be in most new vehicles by May 2018.

Fennell's efforts also have contributed to safer power window switches and to transmission gears that do not engage unless the driver's foot is on the brake.

Her initial campaign in the 1990s sought to require automakers to install trunk lid release mechanisms inside trunks of new vehicles.

Her interest was deeply personal. In 1995, two men kidnapped Fennell and her husband and placed them in their car trunk. Eventually they found the cable that triggered the trunk lid release. For years, Fennell, then working from her San Francisco home, pushed for glow-in-the-dark trunk releases, which became mandatory in 2002.

Fennell's family moved in the late 1990s to Leawood, where she continued her campaigns regarding cars and child safety — including the heatstroke issue. By then, the impact of air bags injuring or killing children riding in the front passenger seat had begun complicating the heatstroke issue.

Parents began placing small children in a car's back seat, in child seats that often faced backward.

"But while we told everyone to put the kids in the back, we did nothing to remind parents that the kids were in the back seat," Fennell said.

The recent KidsAndCars.org petition drive coincides with a string of tragedies.

Within a matter of weeks, an 11-month-old girl died in Hurricane, Utah; a 4-week-old boy died in Statesville, N.C.; and a 22-month-old boy died in Georgia — all after being left in hot cars.

Closer to home, authorities in Wichita charged a man with first-degree murder after he left his 10-month-old foster daughter in his car for two hours last month.

The Northland case earlier this month was notable because passersby become involved. Neither Missouri nor Kansas has a “good Samaritan” law to protect citizens who break into a car to rescue a child from being sued by the parents, said Amber Rollins, KidsAndCars.org’s Kansas City-based director.

Missouri Rep. Jeremy LaFaver, a Kansas City Democrat, wants to introduce legislation to shield such citizens from liability.

“I don’t want that in the back of anyone’s mind if they see a kid in a car and want to intervene,” he said.

So far this year, 21 children nationwide have died of heatstroke after being left inside a vehicle, according to Rollins.

Those are in addition to more than 670 fatalities over the last 20 years.

About 10 percent of the cases involved drugs or alcohol as a factor, she said.

But about 90 percent of the cases involved parents who inadvertently left their children, she said.

“I try to get parents to understand that the worst mistake that they can make is to think this could not happen to them,” Fennell said. “People tend to spit vitriol and be very judgmental, trying to make monsters out of these parents. They feel that if that person is a monster, it can’t happen to them.

“But it can.”

Any new technology would have to break through brain processes that can trip up parents.

Research supports the concepts that multiple brain memory systems compete against one another. One can dominate while another can act subconsciously, said David Diamond, a neuroscientist at the University of South Florida who has testified in court cases involving what he refers to as “forgotten baby syndrome.”

Two brain structures work together to optimize decision-making and multitasking while two others, which control habit-based behaviors and emotional processes, can interfere with the functioning of the first two, Diamond said.

When the habit-based behavior system dominates, he said, a person is less likely to interrupt regular routines to do something additional, even if it has been consciously planned.

“Our hypothesis is that parents forget to stop at the day care because bringing the child to day care is not a part of the parent’s daily routine,” he said.

“We know from brain imaging studies that when we are traveling on a well-traveled route, that there can be a suppression of brain activity that would otherwise be processing the information that the child is in the car. In that case, the parents might get to their destination and do what they always have — exit the car.

“They have lost awareness of the child.”

Fatigue and stress often experienced by sometimes sleep-deprived parents only compound the issue.

Though Diamond would welcome a foolproof device to help parents remember their children in a car, he is not sure what it would look like or how it would operate.

“It has to be waterproof, childproof and cannot depend on batteries,” he said. “And just a movement sensor is not enough.”

Diamond recalled the story of one father who dismissed a sensor-based car alarm apparently triggered by his child in the locked vehicle.

The father looked out at his car from his office window but failed to discern anything amiss.

“He shut off the alarm remotely from his key chain,” Diamond said.

Parents who believe they could never be so distracted are missing the point, he added.

“A high number of people believe that you should not have to be reminded that your child is in the car,” he said. “I would agree, but our memories are flawed.”

To reach Brian Burnes, call [816-234-4120](tel:816-234-4120) or send email to bburnes@kcstar.com.

<http://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article1183929.html#storylink=cpy>