

Monsters or mortals? Children in car seats too often out of sight and mind

By [John Archibald | jarchibald@al.com](#) | [Follow on Twitter](#) on July 18, 2013 at 2:58 PM, updated July 18, 2013 at 4:00 PM

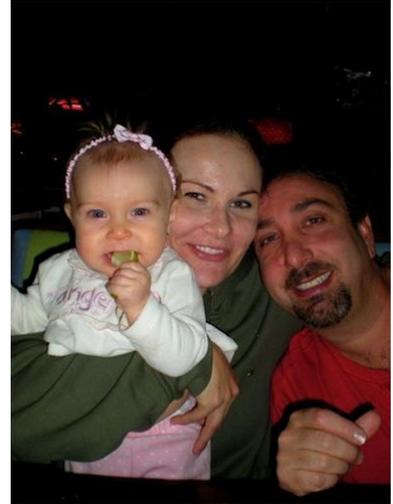
Ray Ray, Kristie Reeves-Cavaliero and Brett Cavaliero. (Family photo)

It couldn't happen to you.
It couldn't happen to me.

Sure, we might get distracted. We might misplace keys, or the remote. We might click our browsers, only to forget what we were looking for, but we could never forget *a child*.

You and I, we'd never leave a child locked in a car, in a hotbox on an Alabama afternoon like that woman in Homewood did this week. We would never leave a precious baby to die, and go obliviously about our business as if – as if we had not just destroyed all that was important to us.

Only a monster could do that.
Or...



It was May of 2011 that Kristie Reeves-Cavaliero and her husband, Brett, played as long as they could with the daughter they called "Ray Ray." They dressed her brightly for "Tropical Day" at daycare and packed her in her car seat. They both kissed her. And Brett drove away, just a little bit late.

Ray Ray slept. And for whatever reason, Brett forgot to turn toward the daycare. And for whatever reason, he forgot she was in the car as he arrived for work. It was lunchtime when the horror of it struck. Brett screamed and a frantic search began. Ray Ray was left in the Texas heat for three hours before she was pulled from the truck.

She gazed into her mom and dad's eyes one last time. But it was too late.

"It's a tragedy," Mrs. Reeves-Cavaliero said Thursday, "that never goes away."

Don't say it could never happen to you or me. Pray it could never happen to you or me.

More than 650 children have died of heat stroke in vehicles in the last two decades, [more than half in the South](#).

About 38 die each year, according the child-safety advocacy group [Kids and Cars](#). About 60 percent of those parents are charged with a crime, from neglect to murder, and just about every one responsible believed it could never happen to them.

It is a horrible, inexplicable, unfathomable. It is a *duh* moment that changes ... everything.

But if you step back a little you can start to see how it happens.

In the 1990s, more than 90 children were killed by passenger air bags in the U.S. The number peaked in 1999, when safety experts began to get the message across that car seats belong in the back, facing the rear. And they do.

But they are out of sight in the back, and too often out of mind.

So new parents, sleep-deprived, stressed by work and a changing routine, began to forget. Time and again, in eerily similar situations, they let autopilot take control, as Brett Cavaliero did.

And while airbag deaths for children have fallen to almost nothing since 1999, [more than 500 children across the U.S.](#) have since died, most of them forgotten, from heat in cars.

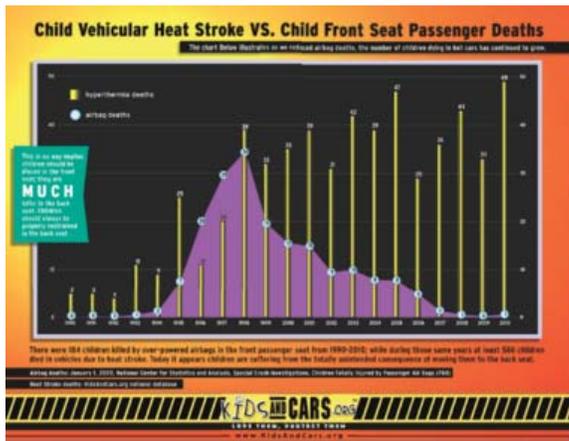
Monsters?

No. Mortals.

Janette Fennell, president and founder of the Kids and Cars group, said many people instantly jump to a conclusion that these are bad parents, junkies and deadbeats. But 90 percent, she said, are the type of people we would consider "the best parents" and pillars of the community.

They are "college professors and ministers, rabbinical students and vice principals," she said. And they all thought – as you and I do – that it could never happen to them.

"The worst thing anyone can do is to think it won't happen to them," Fennell said. "Making a monster of people ... is not going to help. There is no prison around that could hurt these people more than the hell they live in every day."



(courtesy Kids and Cars)

Mrs. Reeves-Cavaliero was struck by the timeline of the Homewood incident, in which Gabriella Gi-Ny Luong died in the back seat of her mother's car. The mother left for work at about 10 a.m., and the child was discovered just before 1:30.

It matched her case almost exactly. In fact, about 25 percent of all children forgotten in cars are left by parents who simply forget to drop the children off at daycare. It is why she and her husband have [devoted their lives since Ray Ray's death to improve communication between parents and daycares](#), so both know when children do not arrive as scheduled.

Fennell urges parents to [look before they lock](#), to put purses or computers in the back seat so they have to check back there before leaving the car. They can keep a teddy bear in the car seat when it is not in use, and put it in the front seat as a reminder when the child is in back.

Avoid distractions. And don't believe it can't happen.

"If you had asked me on May 24, 2011 if you could forget your child in a car, I would have said no," Reeves-Cavaliero said.

For Ray Ray. And for Gabriella. Look before you lock.

11-MONTH-OLD FOUND DEAD IN VEHICLE IN HOMEWOOD

- [Mother of baby left in locked SUV in Homewood: "I wish I was in that car seat"](#)
- [Temperature becomes deadly quickly in a parked car on a warm day \(video\)](#)
- [Monsters or mortals? Children in car seats too often out of sight and mind \(John Archibald\)](#)
- [Forgetting a child in a car: A heartbreaking mistake that could happen to anyone or is it a crime?](#)
- [Authorities identify baby girl who died after left in SUV in Homewood](#)

John Archibald's column appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays in *The Birmingham News*, and on AL.com. Email him at jarchibald@al.com.

http://www.al.com/opinion/index.ssf/2013/07/monsters_or_mortals_children_i.html