

Blind spots in vans may cause caretakers to leave children behind

[Melissa Yeager](#) 9:00 AM, May 13, 2014



KANSAS CITY, Mo. - Tanya Harris still remembers almost passing out when her son's child care center called her to tell her to go to Children's Mercy Hospital on May 17, 2013.

At 8:15 a.m., Harris had helped load 4-year-old Keshawn into the middle seat of the child care van. The driver typically picked Keshawn up and dropped him off every day without incident.

However, around 3 p.m., the child care facility called to tell her the driver had accidentally left Keshawn behind in the van in a remote parking lot for nearly seven hours. Keshawn was sweaty, dehydrated and traumatized.

He had been unable to unbuckle himself from his seat belt and told his mother later he was scared to leave the van by himself.

Given the temperatures that day, Harris said she was lucky Keshawn was alive. Still, what he told her about that day still breaks her heart.

"He said 'Mommy, I just cried and cried and cried a long time for my mommy. I just cried and wanted my mommy to come get me,'" Harris said.

Many people might wonder how any adult could accidentally leave a child behind in a day care van. A 41 Action News investigation uncovered it happens more often than people think and may be due, in part, to blind spots in the large passenger vans many child care providers use to transport children.

Incidents of children left behind not uncommon

Just a month after Keshawn Harris was left on his child care facility's van, another child in the metro was also left behind.

On June 20, 2013, a Lee's Summit day care took children to a pet store on a summer field trip. Reports show about 10-15 minutes after the field trip began, a parent arrived late to drop off her child to join the field trip in progress. As she walked inside, she noticed another child still sitting in the van. Staff members rushed out of the building to get the child. He had been unable to get out of the van by himself because he was unable to unbuckle his seat belt.

The Missouri Department of Health and Social Services investigated the incident. During an interview with the state agency, the teacher admitted she had not counted the kids and had left her attendance list at the day care. Though she called out to make sure all the kids had exited the van, the agency's report described the teacher as "very short" and said she told investigators she could not see over the seats in the van.

That's not surprising to the national safety organization [Kidsandcars.org](#). Their staff told 41 Action News that similar to a school bus, the height of the seats can make it challenging for any adult to spot a child in the van.

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"Especially in those child care vans that have multiple rows and seats, you might not be able to see a child who is slumped down and fallen asleep," said Amber Rollins, a spokeswoman for KidsandCars.org.

To corroborate Rollins' statement, the 41 Action News investigators placed two 5-year-olds in a passenger van. Standing up, only the children's heads were visible. Sitting down, the children could not be seen.

Experts estimate [a child's body temperature can rise three to five times faster inside a vehicle than an adult's](#). The temperature inside a car can quickly climb to 125 degrees on a warm day, putting a child at risk for heatstroke and death.



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Experts say this underscores the need to check every seat in these vans. However, the low ceilings in the vans, as well as the lack of an aisle, can make it difficult for even the most well-meaning adult to check every seat to make sure all the children are out of the vehicle.

Kids and Cars believes children left on day care vans is something that happens with some frequency, but that it's difficult to say just how often. The organization believes the issue is far underreported because there is no central collection system for reports on these types of incidents.

KidsandCars.org tracks them on its own by cataloging news reports in a database. They have records of more than 200 incidents where children were left behind on day care vans. However, they know their database is not complete because many incidents do not show up in media reports or get reported to authorities.

How children get left behind

Many states require child care providers to have policies designed to help make sure no child is forgotten in a bus or van, including Kansas and Missouri. However, Kids and Cars said it is easy to see how these policies could break down. They have found changes in routine, lack of sleep, stress, fatigue, distractions and hormone changes can all diminish the brain's ability to multi-task.

"These are, in many cases, wonderful child care providers that may have gotten distracted by a fussy kid or things happen," remarked Rollins about why these incidents occur. "There's so many children, so many distractions and we're just not perfect. We have human brains that fail us."

For this reason, some day care facilities are moving to small school buses.

"It is one of those things where we have taken a lot of time over the years to develop safety requirements for schools and there's no reason why day cares can't piggyback onto those requirements," said John Goodbrake, from Master's Transportation.

Master's Transportation is a Kansas City business that sells, rents and leases transportation vehicles. They service vehicles for several day cares in the Kansas City area.

The vehicle he sells to many day cares has a reinforced roof, three point seat belts and an aisle down the middle to allow adults to easily walk to the back of the bus.

It also contains a safety alarm to make sure drivers check the bus for children. After the driver turns off the bus, they have two minutes to walk to the rear of the bus and hit a safety button.

"If you don't walk to the back and push the button then the alarm goes off and you know you have a vehicle that hasn't been inspected," Goodbrake said.

The same sort of technology can be installed in vans. Wisconsin, Tennessee and Texas have laws requiring it on day care vans as well. Florida is currently considering a similar law.

Missouri does not have such a law. Neither does Kansas.

Along with the safety alarm, Kids and Cars would like to see technology in all vehicles similar to the weight sensor used to remind people to buckle up. However, they would like the sensor to sound an alarm if there is weight in a seat of someone left behind.

However, without this technology, there are still some policies day cares can put in place to ensure kids exit a van safely. First, they should have a policy to count all children before and after they board. They should also have a policy to contact parents if a child does not show up in class.

If her son's day care had followed these policies, Harris believes Keshawn would have been saved from a lot of trauma. Keshawn is still traumatized from the incident and still receiving therapy one year later.

Harris said he still doesn't understand why he called for his mom and she did not show up to help him.

"I'm still trying to explain to him 'Baby, if mommy would have known you was on that van, I would have come and got you off that van,'" Harris said.

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