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Tragedy in the Backseat.

BY MELISSA BALMAIN

Each year about

37

babies and toddlers die when they are accidentally left strapped in car safety seats or become trapped in vehicles that rapidly heat up.

If you think this senseless tragedy couldn't happen to you, think again.

MARY PARKS AND HER HUSBAND, Jeff, had everything they wanted: a comfortable house in Blacksburg, VA; well-paying jobs (Parks was an accountant, Jeff a research scientist); and two darling boys adopted as babies from Guatemala. The end of August and start of September 2007 had been stressful, though. Twenty-three-month-old Juan and his 4-year-old brother, Byron, had both been sick on and off. Parks's days had been blurs of work, daycare, doctors, business trips, visits with relatives, and anxiety. On September 7, after attending to a feverish Byron the night before, she left him home to recuperate with Jeff. Her plan was to drive Juan to daycare on her way to work.

Rarely had Parks taken just one boy to daycare. Rarely had she gone to work at all if one boy was sick—but this time she and Jeff agreed to swap roles. Moments after she started driving, Parks says, she realized Juan had fallen asleep. It was the last time that morning that she would remember he was in the car. “We were no longer taking anything of his to daycare—we were beyond diaper bags,” she says. So there was no baby gear in the front seat to remind her. She caught no glimpse of him in the rearview mirror, either; in his car seat, Juan was too short to spot easily. Most important, perhaps, Byron wasn't there, chattering away. “He never fell asleep in the car,” Parks explains.

Instead of stopping at the daycare center, she drove right to work. Parks grabbed her purse from the front seat, went into her office, and had “a normal day.” Talked with her supervisor. Ate lunch at her desk. Called Jeff to see how Byron was doing. She even remembers telling colleagues that—since Juan had been sick, too—she might have to leave early if a call came from daycare to get him. In her mind, that's exactly where he was.

After work, Parks drove to the supermarket, shopped for dinner, and continued on to the daycare center to pick Juan up—unaware that he was already sitting right behind her. When she arrived, his teacher asked, “Was Juan out sick today?”

“No,” said Parks. “I brought him this morning.”

“He wasn't here today,” the teacher said.

Within moments, Parks recalls, “a light in my head went on. I took off running toward the car. My heart was already in my feet because I knew how hot it had been that day. I got to the car, jerked open the door, and saw him. I reached over to him. I remember screaming at him, ‘Juan! Juan! You've got to wake up!’” Cradling her son's body—stiff and still as a baby doll's—Parks ran inside the daycare office. One staffer tried desperately to revive Juan with CPR; another called 911. “I went in crying for help,” Parks says, “but I knew he was dead.”

A Heart-Wrenching Epidemic

What happened to Juan that day—death by hyperthermia, caused when the body's temperature rises uncontrollably—has happened to about 450 children in the U.S. since 1998. "It's reasonable to call this an epidemic," says memory expert David Diamond, Ph.D., a scientist at the Veterans' Hospital in Tampa, who is often consulted on such cases. "It happens, on average, once a week from spring to early fall." Babies and young children are not able to regulate their body temperatures well—warming at a rate three to five times faster than an adult—especially in a car, where the windows create a greenhouse effect. In just half an hour, a car's interior can get 35 degrees hotter. Depending on such factors as what color he's wearing and when he last drank something, an infant might die of hyperthermia in just 15 minutes on a 75-degree day. Cooler weather is no guarantee of safety, either. Overly bundled babies—warmly dressed and blanketed in their car seats—have been known to succumb when outdoor temps were in the 60s or even 50s. And despite popular belief, cracking open a window does little good. That tiny bit of air can't begin to offset the heat that is absorbed by a car's seats, dashboard, and walls.

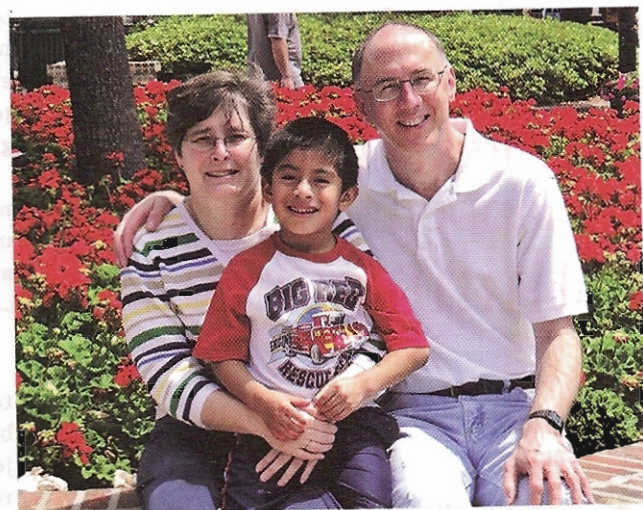
Some children are knowingly and negligently left inside hot vehicles while their parents do errands. Other kids climb inside their parents' parked cars and become trapped. But most, like Juan Parks, are victims of adults' disastrous lapses in memory. "Given the right scenario, I would say this can happen to anyone," says Diamond. "It has nothing to do with how much parents love their kids. It is, to me, a tragic way of learning how the brain works."

Each of us has dueling memory systems, Diamond explains. The first—in the primitive, "reptilian" part of the brain—directs our habits. It's the system that lets you drive home from work without thinking consciously about every turn. The second system—located in more advanced brain regions—is responsible for short-term plans, such as "Buy milk on the way home." And as anyone who has ever forgotten that milk knows, the primitive "habit system" is much more powerful. "It's very difficult to keep in your mind that you want to override your habit system," Diamond says. "And it can take over almost immediately."

Of course, forgetting a child is far different from forgetting a gallon of 2%. But not to the reptilian brain. Imagine that your plan is "Drop kid at babysitter's on the way to work." If you're tired or distracted by worries, or—worse—if you're not the person who usually takes the kid to the sitter's, your habit system can erase that plan with appalling ease. Like Mary Parks, you go straight to work on autopilot, spacing out on the fact that your child is with you in the backseat. You even develop false memories of dropping him off. "The brain is very good at filling in gaps, so you



The key culprits seem to be a change in daily routine, lack of sleep, and stress. It's certainly not about the kind of parent you are.



SOUNDING THE ALARM Mary Parks (shown above with husband Jeff and son Byron, 6) is now working hard to protect other kids from the kind of tragedy that happened to her son Juan (top).

will remember what you assume you did,” Diamond says.

Ironically, hot-car deaths have become much more common thanks to practices meant to protect young passengers: placing them in the backseat and positioning infant seats to face backward. These precautions, which became standard in the 1990s, are important to follow because they shield babies and small kids from airbags and other hazards. But they can also put them “out of sight, out of mind.”

Diamond knows this firsthand. One day last year, he forgot that his baby granddaughter was in the car with him during a drive to the mall. (She normally would not have been.) “I could have walked around that mall for hours, having absolutely no recollection that she was in the car,” Diamond says. Fortunately, his wife was with him, too, and remembered to get the baby out. Experts suspect there are thousands of such “almosts” each year. But few of those stories become public—making it easier for the rest of us to jump to damning conclusions when tragedies like Parks’s hit the news.

Dealing With Grief—and Blame

“People assume this is happening to bad parents, people who take drugs or use alcohol, maybe abusive parents,” says Janette Fennell, the founder of Kidsandcars.org, a nonprofit advocate of car safety for children. Blogs and online forums are filled with hatred for moms like Parks; some even say they should die the same grisly way their children did. “I think people so want to distance themselves from ever thinking that this could happen to them that they really demonize or think these are bad people,” Fennell says. “But the exact opposite is true. It’s like 95 percent of the people this happens to are wonderful—let me go so far as to say doting parents.”

These parents and other caregivers come from dozens of states and span the full spectrum of ethnic groups. They are rich, poor, and in between. Their jobs range from soldier to social worker, postal clerk to pediatrician. Among them are Jodie Edwards and Raelyn Balfour. Like

Parks, both of these moms have always been safety fanatics. Baby gates, outlet plugs, crib monitors: You name it, they’ve bought it. When Balfour and Edwards first heard news accounts about kids dying in hot cars, they felt sorry—but immune. “I thought this couldn’t happen to me because I love my children and I’m a very cautious and overprotective person,” says Edwards, a professor of graduate counseling in Wyoming, OH. “In my mind, it was like, ‘Obviously those parents don’t have their priorities straight,’” echoes Balfour, who owns a cleaning service in Charlottesville, VA.

Eventually, though, Edwards and Balfour each lost a child the way Parks did, for some of the same reasons: a shift in routine; a silent, sleeping baby; no reminders in the front seat. Balfour’s son Bryce, a cheerful soul who “used to just go crazy in his bouncy toy,” was 9 months old when he died. Edwards’s daughter Jenna, who loved watching butterflies and wiggling to music, was almost 11 months. Both babies died in their moms’ cars, parked outside their office buildings. “I knew to protect a child in my home,” Edwards says. “But I didn’t know I needed to do more to protect her in the car.”

A Lifetime of Regret

As Mary Parks tells her story, you wonder if she’ll be able to finish. She sits on the same sofa where she used to cuddle with Juan, and

talks about the day he died. She rubs her forehead. When she comes to the worst parts, she shuts her gentle green eyes and pauses a long, long time.

But she keeps going. More than anything, Parks wants

How to Avoid a Hot-Car Tragedy

- ❑ First and foremost, always put your cell phone, purse, or briefcase, and anything else you’ll need that day, on the floor of the backseat. When you retrieve it at the end of the ride, you’ll notice your child.
- ❑ Seat your younger (or quieter) child behind the front passenger seat, where he’s most likely to catch your eye. Parks’s, Balfour’s, and Edwards’s babies all were behind the driver’s side when they died.
- ❑ Keep a teddy bear or other stuffed animal in the car seat when it’s empty. When you put your child in the seat, move the animal to the front passenger seat, to remind you that your baby’s on board.
- ❑ Ask your child’s babysitter or daycare provider to always phone you promptly if your child isn’t dropped off as scheduled.
- ❑ Make a habit of always opening the back door of your car after you park, to check that there’s no kid back there.
- ❑ Never assume someone else—a spouse, an older child—has taken a young kid out of her seat. Such miscommunication has led to more than a few hot-car deaths.
- ❑ Invest in a device to help you remember small passengers. The Cars-N-Kids monitor plays a lullaby when the car stops and a child is in the seat (\$29.95; carsnkids.com). The ChildMinder System sounds an alarm if you walk away and leave your child in the seat (\$69.95; babyalert.info).
- ❑ Put visual cues in your office and home. Static-cling decals reminding you to check the car seat are available at Emmasinspirations.com and Kidsandcars.org.



More Car Concerns

Hyperthermia is one of the scariest—but by no means only—dangers young children face in and around cars that aren't on the road. Other risks include being run over by a car in a driveway, getting hurt or strangled by a power window, or putting a car in gear while playing in the driver's seat. For tips on avoiding these accidents and many more, visit Kidsandcars.org. The site also provides ways to support legislation that would improve car safety for children.

you to understand how a parent—even a smart, loving, safety-obsessed parent—can accidentally leave a child in a hot car until it's too late. And she hopes you'll take some critical steps, so heartbreakingly simple in hindsight, to avoid making this terrible mistake yourself. (See “How to Avoid a Hot-Car Tragedy,” page 109.) “To ensure that no other child dies this way, and no one faces this—that is how I'm loving Juan now,” Parks says.

In the two years since Juan's death, Parks has endured a horrific legal ordeal along with a crushing sense of guilt. First, a complaint was filed against her for serious abuse and neglect (standard procedure in such cases, depending on your state). Parks wouldn't be allowed to spend a minute alone with Byron for 15 months. Then, like 60 percent of adults involved in hot-car tragedies, Parks also faced criminal charges. On top of her grief, on top of helping Jeff and Byron through the loss of their son and brother, she spent more than 19 months worrying she might go to prison. “What terrified me was that Byron would lose a mother and Jeff would lose a wife,” she says.

Although marriages often fail after the death of a child, Parks says hers grew stronger. Sure, Jeff sometimes withdrew as he mourned (“He's the introvert,” Parks says. “I'm

the talker and the crier”). Yes, there were days when they didn't feel “totally connected.” But with help from their church, their families, and “the bond of being best friends since high school,” they pulled through. “Jeff never doubted that our son died in an accident,” Parks says. “He never blamed me from day one.”

Last December, Parks got a vote of confidence from the legal system, as well: All charges against her were dropped because of a lack of evidence of any criminal intent. Since then, she has devoted plenty of time to doing volunteer work for Kidsandcars.org.

Parks holds up a framed photo taken on the Mother's Day before Juan died. It shows him on her lap, a round-faced, bright-eyed boy with a mischievous grin. Parks smiles in the photo, too; above the picture frame, though, she is near tears.

“I just want to tell parents that even if you don't believe this could happen to you, just do the prevention anyway,” she says. “It only takes two seconds to look in the backseat before you leave your car. It could be a lifetime of regret if you don't.”

Melissa Balmain, a Parenting contributing editor, is a mother of two in Blacksburg, VA.

OVERHEARD ON FACEBOOK.COM

“It sounds crazy, but all it takes is one sleep-deprived parent and one sleeping baby. So tragic—don't take it for granted.”

—Shannon Hogan