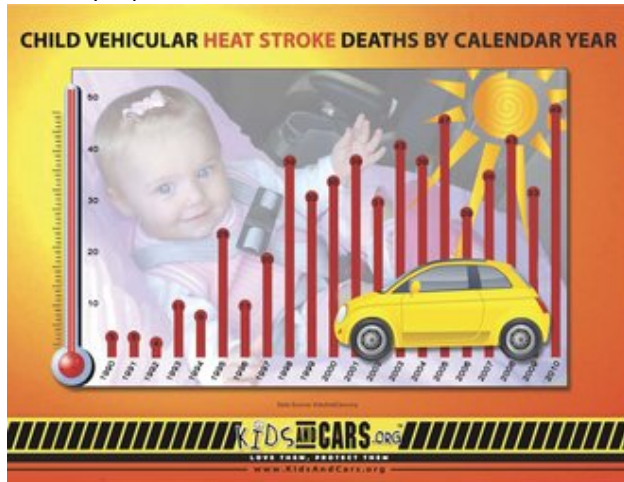


Hot cars and dead kids: A national tragedy

Tuesday, April 10, 2012



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With summer hurtling towards us faster than usual this year — temperatures across the U.S. [were 8.6 degrees above normal in March](#) — we are just weeks away from the inevitable horror stories of children dying from heatstroke after being left alone in parked cars. Since 1998, an average of 38 children per year have died from heatstroke (overheating of the body, a.k.a. [hyperthermia](#)) while trapped in cars, including at least [11 in Pennsylvania and 12 in New Jersey](#). That [accounts for 16 percent](#) of deaths of kids in non-traffic motor-vehicle incidents.

With [summers heating up from climate change](#), this number is likely to grow.

Children are especially vulnerable to the heat inside cars, even when left alone for just a short time. The temperature inside a non-operating motor vehicle, *even with windows cracked open*, will increase rapidly in the hot sun. Seventy-five percent of the maximum temperature rise will occur within five minutes of closing a car. [One study showed](#) that even on a 72°F day, “internal vehicle temperature can reach 117°F within 60 minutes.”

Young children and babies are not as efficient at regulating body temperature and are thus more vulnerable to heatstroke. Other heat-related injuries, including burns from buckles, can also result from leaving children in closed cars. That’s not to mention, of course, the general dangers of leaving children unattended in motor vehicles, which include a child putting the car in motion, operating other power control features like windows, or abduction. The bottom line: The solution to this is easy. *Don’t leave your kids alone in the car. Ever.*

But stern warnings and education, it turns out, are not enough. A recent [study of car-related heatstroke deaths among children](#) found that only 13 percent of were intentionally left unattended. Seventy-five percent of the time children were *unintentionally* left behind. In most cases, the child was simply forgotten in the vehicle, forgotten to be dropped off at the daycare/babysitter and left in the vehicle, forgotten by a daycare worker in the vehicle, or there was a miscommunication between caretakers.

The [National Highway Transportation Safety Association](#) calls attention to the challenges of motor vehicle-related child heatstroke deaths, and [encourages parents](#) to “be extra careful” when you change any part of your routine. Anything that might cause you to even momentarily forget that your child is alone in the car could lead to tragedy.

There are things that we as a nation can do to help us learn from — and minimize — this danger:

1. There is no national database for motor vehicle-related child heatstroke fatalities and injuries. Creating one could help measure the problem more accurately (it is likely that this is an underreported event); such data would then help develop education programs targeted to the places and people more likely to be involved.
2. There is a quick and easy fix that the keep-government-out-of-my-life folks aren’t going to like: Put a sensor in all cars to indicate to the driver as she or he gets out that someone is still present in the vehicle, just like the little chimes we have all endured for years after leaving the headlights on or the keys in the ignition. Because the cause of this event usually is accidental and the outcome can be dead children, this would seem to be a no brainer.

In 2010, records indicate that [49 children died](#) from heatstroke in cars, the most in recent history. Don’t we owe them and their families better?