

## Two children die in hot cars as risky season begins

*A Sugarland, Texas, family mourns the loss of a seven-month-old boy, after the father left the child in the car. KPRC's Nefertiti Jaquez reports.*

**By JoNel Aleccia 5/11/2012**

It's a tragic sign of spring: Two young children have died this month in Texas and Missouri after their parents accidentally left them all day in hot vehicles.

Although such deaths occur in nearly every month of the year, records show that warmer weather typically heralds a seasonal spike in fatalities from hyperthermia, or heat stroke, among children left in cars and trucks. Worse, experts add, such calamities don't have to happen.

"It's a totally preventable occurrence," said Kate Carr, president and chief executive of Safe Kids Worldwide, which recently launched a new campaign to raise awareness about the problem. "Our hearts go out to the parents and families of these children."

In the most recent cases, a 7-month-old boy from the Sugar Land area of Houston died May 3 after the child's father, Leland Jacobson, 41, left the baby for hours in the backseat of a pickup truck in 89-degree weather. Jacobson wasn't normally the parent who took his children to day care and became distracted after dropping off the older kids, police said.

On the same day, a 13-month-old boy from Lee's Summit, Mo., died after his mother, a teacher, mistakenly believed she'd already left the child at day care that morning. Temperatures reached 83 degrees that afternoon.

"The investigation has revealed no signs of foul play and at this time it appears that the death was a tragic accident," said Sgt. Chris Depue, spokesman for the Lee's Summit Police Department.

That's true of most cases in which children die after being left in hot vehicles. At least 529 such deaths have been recorded since 1998, including the two logged in the past week, according to figures from the Department of Geosciences at San Francisco State University, which tracks reports.

On average, 38 children die each year in hot cars, reports show. The numbers typically begin to climb in May, with an average of three deaths per month. They spike in July and August, when nine deaths, on average, are recorded, the figures show.

Overall, more than half of the deaths -- 52 percent -- occur when a child is mistakenly left in a vehicle, typically by a parent or caregiver who is rushed or stressed, said Carr.

"That's a story we've heard first-hand," she said. "The baby falls asleep in the back and mom or dad gets distracted. You can get in the car headed to work and absolutely forget."

More precisely, a distracted brain can get stuck on autopilot, allowing parents to believe they actually have left the child, said Janette E. Fennell, founder and president of KidsAndCars.org, which has been focused on the problem for a dozen years. Her agency has counted 620 child deaths from hyperthermia since 1990.

Frequently, the accidents occur when there's a deviation from the normal routine. Dad is handling the drop-off instead of mom, or there's been some other change in schedule.

"The parents are absolutely certain that their children are in a very safe place," Fennell added. It's only later, at the end of the work day, for instance, that they realize what's happened.

About 30 percent of the deaths occur when a child is playing in an unattended vehicle and becomes trapped inside -- or in the trunk, reports show. Another 17 percent of deaths occur when a child is intentionally left alone, for instance, when a parent went shopping.

Once inside, the babies and children face temperatures that soar quickly to lethal heights. It takes only 10 minutes for the temperature to jump 20 degrees; within 30 minutes, it can climb by 34 degrees, according to a vehicle heat study sponsored by General Motors, which helps fund Safe Kids Worldwide.

Under that scenario, even a mild day -- 70 degrees -- can quickly become deadly.

"Cracking the window doesn't help," Carr said. "If you've ever been in a hot car that's parked on an asphalt parking lot, you know how quickly that car heats up, even if your windows are down."

### Child's body heats five times faster

Regardless of how or why a child is left behind, the effect is swift and devastating, said Dr. Leticia Ryan, researcher and clinician at Children's National Medical Center in Washington D.C.

"The child's body heats up three to five times faster than an adult's," she said. "Their internal systems are not fully developed."

Kids don't sweat as efficiently as adults and their bodies absorb heat faster. It can take as little as 15 minutes in an overheated vehicle for a child to begin to suffer life-threatening brain or kidney injuries. When body temperature reaches 104 degrees, internal organs begin to shut down. At 107 degrees, children die.

"It's the double whammy of being more vulnerable to the heat illness in a short amount of time," said Ryan, a pediatric emergency medicine expert who has seen many young victims of heat stroke. "In most cases, they're usually too young to get themselves out of the car seat or to alert people outside of the car to their predicament."



Norman Collins Sr.

Three-month-old "Bishop" Collins died on May 29, 2011 after he was accidentally left in a car in a church parking lot in Clarksdale, Miss., on a 93-degree day. His grandfather, Norman Lee Van Collins Sr., has become an advocate for car safety.

Such deaths leave the families devastated, too. The shock, grief and guilt are overwhelming, said Norman Van Lee Collins Sr., whose 3-month-old grandson, Norman Van Lee Collins III, known as "Bishop," died last May 29 a hot car in a Mississippi church parking lot.

The child was accidentally left behind as his family hurried into a church service. The child's father was the minister of music, so he was retrieving his keyboard from the car. He asked another church member to get the baby and

take him to the nursery. But the church member didn't hear him.

"There was just this miscommunication," the grandfather recalled sadly. "I lost my grandson."

To compound the tragedy, when Norman Collins Jr. reported the accident to the police, he was arrested for negligent manslaughter.

Nineteen states have laws that address leaving a child unattended in a vehicle. Thirty-one states have no specific laws, according to San Francisco State reports. An Associated Press investigation in 2007 found that charges were filed in about half of cases in which children died of heat stroke in vehicles; more than 80 percent were convicted.

In Collins' case, the grand jury didn't choose to indict him. "I did not even explore why," the senior Collins said. "I was just so glad they didn't."

The bereaved grandfather now speaks publicly about Bishop's death in order to warn other families about the danger.

### Airbags put babies in backseat

In one of the ironies of vehicle safety, the number of hyperthermia deaths in cars has skyrocketed since the early 1990s, when the advent of airbags led to directives that young children be placed in the back seats of cars and in rear-facing car seats for infants.

That position makes it easier to overlook babies, even for the most conscientious parent, said Carr, who recalled nearly forgetting to drop her own 2-year-old at day care -- until the child spoke up.

"Thankfully, my daughter was not a small baby who fell asleep," she said. "From my own personal place in my heart, I have a great deal of empathy for these parents."

Safety advocates such as Fennell, of KidsAndCars.org, have lobbied for years for technical solutions to the problem of leaving babies behind. Some private firms have come up with various devices, monitors and other alerts that can be purchased online, but none is available off the shelf, Fennell said.

Better, she said, would be a required sensor that could alert drivers that someone is still in the vehicle when they're locking the car.

“We feel this is a good strategy because we know that many people feel that this ‘could never happen to them’ and may not think they need to purchase aftermarket technology,” she added.

Meantime, KidsAndCars advises all parents to institute an “iron-clad” rule with day care providers to contact parents if a child has not arrived as scheduled.

Safe Kids also advises that parents put back-up systems in place to prevent tragedy: Set up a “peace of mind plan” in which it’s routine to call or text a partner or other caregivers so that everyone knows when a child has been dropped off.

Place a purse, briefcase, gym bag, cell phone or other object needed at the destination in the backseat with the child. Set an alarm on a cell phone or computer calendar as a reminder to drop a child at care.

Though the number of child deaths from hyperthermia in cars is small, the actual number of incidents in which kids are endangered is likely much larger.

In Palm Beach County, Fla., there were 500 near-misses last year in which kids were retrieved from cars before they were seriously hurt, Carr said. The actual number of close calls is unknown.

“Never leave a child alone, even for a minute,” she said. “It can and it does and it might happen to you.”

<http://vitals.msnbc.msn.com/news/2012/05/11/11640581-two-children-die-in-hot-cars-as-risky-season-begins?lite>