

Garrick warns of danger leaving kids in hot cars

8/3/2012 By Martin Garrick, 74th District assemblyman

An assistant principal stops to pick up doughnuts on her way to school. Her day goes on as normal, until she realizes she was supposed to have dropped her youngest child off at preschool that morning, a responsibility that was usually her husband's. She remembers only after another teacher spots the little girl inside the vehicle, still strapped into her car seat. The mother frantically pulls her daughter out of the car, but it is too late. She had been there for eight hours, and temperatures inside the car had reached nearly 150°.

The story of a parent forgetting their young child in the car, with such heart-breaking consequences, is so sensational one might think it is surely an isolated incident. It isn't.

Every year, nearly twenty children die when their caregivers unintentionally leave them in a car. The children suffer from hyperthermia, or heat stroke, which occurs when a person's temperature exceeds 104 degrees, and the body can no longer regulate its own temperature. Children's bodies can warm at a rate three to five times faster than an adult's, making them more vulnerable to heat stroke. With our hotter temperatures, California is third in the country for child vehicular heat stroke deaths, behind only Florida and Texas.

Parents who have experienced this tragedy have reported that there was a change in their schedule that day: usually it was their spouse that took the child to daycare, or they took a different route into work, or made a stop on their route that they normally didn't. Additionally, the number of child hyperthermia deaths has risen sharply since rear-facing child car seats were mandated. While these types of car seats are the best in terms of overall safety, they make it easier to literally overlook that the child is still in the car.

We must be proactive in protecting our children from hyperthermia. Kids and Cars, an organization that maintains a comprehensive website dedicated to preventing child deaths in hot cars, as well as a variety of other potentially fatal threats from vehicles, recommends these preventative steps:

- Put something – such a cell phone or handbag – in the backseat of your vehicle that requires you to open the back door every time you park.
- Keep a stuffed animal in your child's car seat. Place it on the front seat as a reminder when your baby is in the back seat.
- Ask your babysitter or child care provider to call you if your child hasn't arrived on time.

Parents must also be aware of how easily children can get stuck inside a vehicle. Thirty percent of the children that die in hot cars every year became trapped when they were playing in a vehicle, and their parents didn't realize where they were until it was too late. If you can't find your child, your vehicle – including its trunk – is one of the first places you should look. Kids and Cars also sells emergency trunk releases, which can be used by children to open a trunk in the event that they do become trapped inside.

Finally, 17 percent of child hot cars deaths occur when a caregiver intentionally leaves a child in a vehicle. The adult may be unaware of how quickly cars can heat up. San Francisco State University conducted a study on the temperature increases in cars. The study was done on sixteen dates when the outside temperature ranged from the relatively cool 72° to the warmer 96°. In just ten minutes, the car's temperature had increased by an average of 19°. In thirty minutes, it was 34° hotter. That means the inside of the car could register well over 100° in half an hour even if the outside temperature was not hot.

It is important to note the study found that "cracking" the windows – leaving them partially open – had little effect. It is never safe to leave a child unattended in a car.

Any parent can tell you that taking care of a family is a rewarding – but also stressful and tiring – job. We must be aware that hurriedness, exhaustion, and distraction all increase the chances of a child being forgotten in a car. Likewise, we need to be vigilant about teaching our children that vehicles are not to be played in or around. And of course, leaving a child in a car should not be an option.

Kids and Cars offers this warning: "The most dangerous mistake a parent or caregiver can make is to think it cannot happen to them or their family."

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