

From errand to crime: Parents now face hard consequences for leaving kids in car

A. Pawlowski TODAY contributor, Friday, July 12, 2013



Courtesy Christina Moon, Christina Moon celebrates her daughter Bella's 4th birthday last month. She faces jail time and a fine for leaving the girl alone in a car while running an errand.

By the time Christina Moon pulled up to her local J.C. Penney to make a return after a morning of errands, her 4-year-old daughter was engrossed in a film in the back of the family's SUV.

So when it came time to go inside the store, the girl protested.

"She said, 'Mom, I don't want to go shopping, I don't want to get out of the car again,'" Moon, who lives in Brighton, Mich., recalled. "I knew I needed to let her come in with me, but she insisted." It seemed perfectly safe. Moon, 32, was parked close to the store -- located in a rural, suburban community she knew well. She left the engine running to keep the air conditioning going on that sunny May morning and locked the car from the outside. There were no keys in the ignition because her Ford Explorer has a remote start. She'd be right back, she thought.

But the errand took about 15 minutes -- longer than Moon expected because shoppers were out in force ahead of Mother's Day. Back in the parking lot, her daughter Bella was fine inside the SUV, but someone spotted her alone and called 911.

"Finally, I did my return and I ran to my car and I saw the police car circling the parking lot and my heart just sank. I knew as soon as I saw that vehicle that was it -- I knew he was there for me," Moon said.

The mom has since been investigated by Child Protective Services and faces a \$500 fine and 93 days in jail. Moon has pleaded guilty in the case, so she has to pay \$2,000 in court costs in addition to any fine. Jail time is a possibility, though she is hoping she will get probation when she is sentenced on July 23.

'Tough words' for parents

Michigan is one of 19 states in the U.S. with laws that specifically make it illegal to leave a child unattended in a vehicle, according to KidsAndCars.org, a nonprofit child safety organization. With 21 [children dying from heat stroke inside a car](#) so far this year in the U.S. and Canada, it's painfully clear how dangerous it is to leave kids alone in cars.

"The purpose of the laws is not to be the parent police," said Janette Fennell, president and founder of KidsAndCars.org. "What they're really meant to do is to say, maybe you don't know this is serious, but it is."

But cases like Moon's -- where a parent decides to dash in and out of a store without child in tow and is prosecuted for it -- are getting under the skin of some parenting experts.

"I feel as if we've criminalized something that we all know in our heart of hearts is generally safe," said Lenore Skenazy, [blogger](#) and author of "Free-Range Kids, How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts with Worry)."

"I do think it's dangerous to leave a child alone for a long time in a car. I also think that a parent is capable of deciding if it makes sense to leave her kids in the car for the duration of an errand."

Most people remember waiting in cars while their parents ran a few errands, a practice that wasn't "crazy negligent" then and still isn't now, she added.

Fennell countered there are many dangers lurking inside a car besides the obvious risk of heat stroke. If a car is running and the kid is playing with the power window switches, he could strangle himself if he sticks his head outside. Children who've been watching mom push the buttons on the dashboard could try the same and knock the car into gear. All those scenarios have actually happened, Fennell noted.

"It's interesting when people are justifying that 'I know my child, I know what's best for my child, I'm the parent,' but maybe they should sit on our website for an hour," she said.

"They're putting their own convenience ahead of the safety and well-being of the children and people don't like to hear that. Those are tough words."

Jail time is possibility

But Skenazy cautions against "worst first thinking," or immediately coming up with the very worst-case scenario -- heatstroke, kidnapping or carjacking -- and proceeding as if it's likely to happen. Parents want to keep their kids safe

more than anybody and if they decide it's OK to leave a child in a car while running an errand that won't take too long on a day that's not too hot, the odds show they are right, she said.

Skenazy also has disdain for people who call the police right away when they see a child alone in a car, instead of waiting a few minutes to see if a parent will emerge.

"The idea that you should always get the authorities involved strikes me as less Good Samaritan and more KGB," Skenazy said.

Back in Michigan, Moon wishes the person who called 911 realized the consequences to her family. Child Protective Services came to her home four times, though the agency found no reason to keep the case open, she said.

Still, she knows some people think she's a terrible mother.

"It's been very traumatic and stressful," Moon said, adding that she will now have child abuse on her record. "We all think it's just absurd... where is the common sense?"

Have you ever left your child alone in a car while running an errand? Let us know on the [TODAY Moms Facebook page](#).

<http://www.today.com/moms/errand-crime-parents-now-face-hard-consequences-leaving-kids-car-6C10584642>