

MOM STOP: Forgetting a child in the car can happen to anyone

By Lydia Seabol Avant *Published: Sunday, July 28, 2013 at 3:30 a.m. Modified: Wednesday, July 24, 2013 at 1:49 p.m.*

An 11-month-old girl died from heatstroke in Homewood on July 17 when her mother forgot her in the car and left her in the hot vehicle for three hours.

The girl, Gabrielle Gi-Ny Luong, was discovered inside the car, where the temperature had risen to more than 120 degrees. Luong's mother found her daughter after she got a call from the baby sitter asking why the girl hadn't been dropped off.

The sad truth is 21 kids have died in the U.S. after being left in cars this year. During summer, a child dying from heatstroke in closed cars occurs about every week. In 2012, there were 32 children to die in unattended vehicles, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Since 1998, there have been at least 559 heatstroke deaths of children left in cars, an average of 38 per year, the NHTS reports.

Some people may question how any parent can forget that their child is in the car. But, I can understand. Truth is, I almost did.

In August 2012, I had a lot on my mind as I took my commute to the newsroom. I was thinking about work and trying to sign my daughter up for ballet. My mind had been going over what we needed to get at the store and how I needed to drop off packages at the post office. I remember checking my purse to make sure I remembered my cellphone and I checked the clock to see what time it was as I pulled into the parking lot. What I did not check was the backseat. I turned off the engine, grabbed my purse, opened the door and set one foot on the pavement when a little voice spoke from behind the driver's seat.

"Momma, where are we?" asked my daughter, then 3.

She was puzzled as why we weren't at her preschool. I thank God my child was old enough to talk to me and know something wasn't right. My son, only 1, smiled at me from the backseat, sitting next to his sister.

I could blame my forgetfulness on thinking about too many things, or the fact that school had just started back and so we were in a new routine.

Anyone can forget their kids in the car and, as we've seen this month with the little girl in Homewood, the results can be tragic. It also doesn't take high outdoor temperatures to cause heatstroke. According to www.safercar.gov, heatstroke can occur in temperatures as low as 57 degrees. On an 80 degree day, temperatures in a vehicle can reach fatal levels in 10 minutes. There are steps that parents and caregivers can take to prevent children from being left in cars.

Here are some important tips from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:

- Never leave an infant or child alone in a vehicle, even if the windows are open or the engine is running with the air conditioning on.
- Don't let children play in an unattended vehicle.
- Make a habit of checking the front and backseats before locking the door and walking away.
- Place your purse, briefcase, or something you are sure you'll remember in the backseat so you will see if a child is left in the vehicle.
- Write yourself a note to check the backseat and place it where you'll see it.
- Always lock doors and trunks and keep keys out of reach. If a child is missing, check the vehicle first.
- Ask your child care center to call if your child doesn't arrive on time.
- If you see a child in a hot vehicle, call 911. If they are distressed, get them out and cool them down rapidly.

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