

Mother Copes With Loss Of Child By Educating Others

July 26, 2013 NPR, Jacob Fenston



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Every year, dozens of children die after being forgotten in a hot car. One Virginia mother is working to change that — by sharing her own story.

Earlier this month, two local infants died of heat stroke, after being accidentally left in cars — one in Baltimore County, the other in Arlington. It's a parent's worst nightmare, but each year, this happens dozens of times across the country. One Virginia mother has made it her mission to prevent these tragic deaths.

In March 2007, Lyn Balfour's son Bryce was 9 months old. March 30 — a Friday — was the end of a hectic week, and Balfour was just about to leave work when she got a call from her babysitter, who wanted to check in and see how Bryce was doing.

"I'm like, 'What do you mean? He's there with you,'" Balfour recalls saying. "And she says, 'No, he's not here.'"

Balfour couldn't understand what the babysitter was saying; she remembered dropping her son off that morning.

"That's one of the dangers, is misremembering," says Balfour. "Where you do something every day, like taking medication. You swear you took, it and you never did."

In the next days and weeks and months, she would keep replaying that morning. What had happened? That morning, her normal, daily routine was all mixed up.

"My memory triggers on a normal day would have been the diaper bag."

Usually she left it next to her on the front seat — that morning, her husband had put it in the back.

"Hearing the baby in the back seat."

Usually Bryce would coo and chatter. That morning he was sick with a cold, and didn't make a sound.

"Seeing the baby in the rear view mirror, behind the passenger seat in my field of view."

That morning, her husband had put the car seat on the other side of the car.

"Dropping off my husband first."

Usually Jarrett drove himself; that morning she dropped him off.

"You know, in your mind you say, 'I have a drop-off, check, it's done.'"

Then, she got an emergency call from work and spent the rest of the drive putting out fires.

"I go past, in a green light, right past where I would make a left to drop him off at daycare."

She got to work, parked the car, and went on with her day.

Until that call from the babysitter: Her mind was racing as she dropped the phone and ran to the car.

"I was screaming hysterically, but I kinda went into military mode," she says. "I pulled him out of the car, and I put him on the ground, and started CPR, and no one wants to know what that feels like to perform CPR on your own child."

Bryce had been in the car, strapped into his car seat in the sunny parking lot for seven-and-a-half hours. Though the temperature outside was just 66 degrees that day, inside the car it was 108 degrees.

"I was one of those parents that had heard about this happening, and said, 'that's an irresponsible parent, that can't possibly be me. I could never forget my child.'"

Could it happen to you?

How could a loving parent forget a child?

"This can happen to anyone," says Janette Fennell, founder of the group Kids and Cars, which campaigns to prevent accidents like this.

She points to brain research to explain.

"In the very front of our brain, which is the pre-frontal cortex, that's where we keep our list of things to do: 'I'm going to drop off my child, I'm going to get a cup of coffee, then as soon as I get to work I'm going to find the document I need.'"

When Lyn Balfour drove to work that day, that front part of her brain was sort of overridden by another part of the brain — the basal ganglia, which handles routine behavior, like driving to work.

"Most people have experienced this," says Fennell. "When they're driving somewhere and then, they call it autopilot. And that is that part of the brain just taking over."

Kate Carr, president of Safe Kids Worldwide, has had that autopilot experience while driving. She was supposed to drop off you 3-year-old daughter at daycare.

"It wasn't my normal routine to go and drop her off in the morning at her daycare. And as we were driving on Connecticut Avenue here in Washington, D.C., we crossed the bridge and were getting close to my office. This little voice from the back came and said, 'Aren't you going to drop me off at school today?'"

They turned the car around, and everyone got to where they were going. But in slightly different circumstances that day could have ended disastrously. On average, more than 30 children die in hot cars each year, nationwide. This year, we're on track for a higher number.

"I wish I could explain why we're seeing increased numbers as compared to where we were at this point last year," says Carr. "Sadly, to date, there have been 23 children who have lost their lives in a hot vehicle this year."

Last year, the number of deaths was 14 by late July. Experts say these deaths are all preventable. But what can be done to stop them, when nobody thinks it will happen to them? Some say charging parents for negligence is part of the answer.

Living with grief

Paul Ebert has prosecuted two such high-profile cases in the past decade. He is the Commonwealth's Attorney in Prince William County, Va.

"Crimes that are accidents, whether it be this type of crime or vehicular manslaughter or things of that nature, are always hard to prosecute and there are always two sides to the story. But they are crimes, and they let the message go out, in hopes that someone else will think twice before they do the same negligent act which may cause the death or serious bodily harm to another."

Nationwide, charges are filed in about half of these cases. For Lyn Balfour, the phone call came the same day she buried her son, April 6, 2007. She was being charged with felony murder.

"When you make a mistake of this magnitude, it doesn't matter whether you go to jail. It doesn't matter where you are. You're in hell every day."

She didn't go to jail — the jury acquitted her. But her conscience didn't. That's why she's told her story in countless interviews over the past six years.

"You know, people say, 'She should have gone to jail, or she should have her uterus removed, or she should never be allowed to have children again.' But this is my penance."

To relive that day over and over and over, in public.

Balfour now works with the group Kids and Cars, and she tells every parent she meets her prevention tips: keep a teddy bear in the front seat to remind you your baby's in the back, or put your cell phone, something you need, in the back with the baby.

Kids and Cars is also pushing carmakers and Congress to embrace new technology. They say the same way your car beeps if you leave the lights on, it should beep if you've left your baby in the back seat.

July 31 is National Heatstroke Prevention Day, focusing on ending the deaths of kids in hot cars.

http://wamu.org/programs/metro_connection/13/07/26/mother_copes_with_loss_of_child_by_educating_others

TRANSCRIPT 



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MS. EMILY BERMAN

00:00:03 Our next story is about the sort of safety risks most people never imagine they might encounter. Earlier this month, two local infants died of heat stroke, after being accidentally left in cars, one in Baltimore County, the other in Arlington. It's practically unimaginable for parents, but each year it happens dozens of times across the country. Jacob Fenston has the story of one Virginia mother who's made it her mission to prevent these tragic deaths. And a word of caution, some of what you hear in the story may be upsetting for listeners.

MS. LYN BALFOUR

00:00:38 My name is Lyn Balfour. I live in Earlysville, Va., which is basically a suburb of Charlottesville. I have five wonderful children.

MR. JACOB FENSTON

00:00:47 Was Bryce your first child or did you have...

BALFOUR

00:00:50 He was my second. My first son, when Bryce was born, was 12.

FENSTON

00:00:55 Okay.

BALFOUR

00:00:56 So he was the first son of my current husband.

FENSTON

00:00:59 In March 2007, Lyn Balfour's son Bryce was 9 months old, and Balfour was busy juggling work and family. It was the end of the month, a Friday, the end of a hectic week. She was just about to leave work that day when she got a call from her babysitter, who wanted to check in and see how Bryce was doing.

BALFOUR

00:01:17 And I'm like, "What do you mean? He's there with you." And she says, "No, he's not here." And I said, "Well, what do you mean? Did Jarrett pick him up from work?"

FENSTON

00:01:24 Jarrett is Balfour's husband.

BALFOUR

00:01:26 She was like, "No, Lyn. You didn't drop him off." She began to panic. She said, "You didn't drop him off." And I immediately got this huge catch in my throat and my heart was pounding. And I'm like, "Oh, my God." I went back to, like, flashback that whole morning of I know I dropped him off and I remember dropping him off. That's one of the dangers, is misremembering, where you do something every day, like taking medication, you swear you took it, but you never did.

FENSTON

00:01:53 In the next days and weeks and months, she would keep replaying that morning. What had happened? That morning, her normal, daily routine was all mixed up.

BALFOUR

00:02:01 My memory triggers on a normal day would have been the diaper bag.

FENSTON

00:02:04 Usually she left it next to her on the front seat. That morning, her husband had put it in the back.

BALFOUR

00:02:09 Hearing the baby in the back seat.

FENSTON

00:02:10 Usually Bryce would coo and chatter. That morning he was sick with a cold, and didn't make a sound.

BALFOUR

00:02:16 Seeing the baby in the rear view mirror, behind the passenger seat in my field of view.

FENSTON

00:02:20 That morning, her husband had put the car seat on the other side.

BALFOUR

00:02:23 Dropping off my husband.

FENSTON

00:02:24 Usually Jarrett drove himself.

BALFOUR

00:02:26 You know, in your mind you say, "I have a drop-off, check, it's done."

FENSTON

00:02:30 Then, she got an emergency call from work and spent the rest of the drive putting out fires.

BALFOUR

00:02:34 I go past, in a green light, right past where I would make a left to drop him off at daycare.

FENSTON

00:02:40 She got to work, parked the car, and went on with her day, until that call from the babysitter. Her mind was racing as she dropped the phone and ran to the car.

BALFOUR

00:02:49 I immediately started screaming "Someone call 911."

911 OPERATOR

00:02:52 911.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN #1

00:02:53 Yes. We need -- did you get her?

OPERATOR

00:02:57 Where are you?

#1

00:02:59 Charlottesville, Va.

FENSTON

00:03:00 This is the 911 call. Balfour is in the background screaming.

OPERATOR

00:03:04 You have a baby what?

#1

00:03:05 A baby passed out, not breathing.

OPERATOR

00:03:09 Okay. Does anybody know CPR?

#1

00:03:13 The mother's performing CPR right now.

BALFOUR

00:03:16 I was screaming hysterically, but I kind of went into military mode, and I pulled him out of the car, and I put him on the ground, and started CPR, and nobody wants to know what that feels like to...

BALFOUR

00:03:27 Oh, my God, no.

BALFOUR

00:03:29 ...perform CPR on your own child.

#1

00:03:32 I'm not sure what happened.

FENSTON

00:03:37 Bryce had been in that car, strapped into his car seat in the sunny parking lot for seven-and-a-half hours. Though the temperature outside was just 66 degrees that day, inside the car it was 108 degrees.

BALFOUR

00:03:49 I was one of those parents that had heard about this happening, and said, "That's an irresponsible parent, that can't possibly be me. I could never forget my child."

FENSTON

00:03:59 How could a loving parent forget a child?

MS. JANETTE FENNELL

00:04:01 This can happen to anyone. It doesn't have any social or racial or economic vein to it.

FENSTON

00:04:09 Janette Fennell is founder of the group Kids and Cars, which campaigns to prevent accidents like this. She points to brain research to explain.

FENNELL

00:04:18 In the very front of our brain, which is the pre-frontal cortex, that's where we keep kind of our list of things to do. All right. I'm going to, you know, drop off my child; I'm going to get a cup of coffee; and then as soon as I get to work I'm going to find the document I needed.

FENSTON

00:04:31 When Lyn Balfour drove to work that day, that front part of her brain was sort of overridden by another part, the basal ganglia, which handles routine behavior, like driving to work.

FENNELL

00:04:41

Most people have experienced this. When they're driving somewhere and then, they call it autopilot. And that is that part of your brain just taking over.

MS. KATE CARR

00:04:50 I actually do have a story about this.

FENSTON

00:04:52 Kate Carr is president of Safe Kids Worldwide. She remembers one morning when her daughter was three and she was supposed to drop her off at daycare.

CARR

00:05:00 It wasn't my normal routine to go and drop her off in the morning. And as we were driving on Connecticut Avenue here in Washington, D.C., we crossed the bridge and we were getting close to my office. This little voice from the back came and said, "Aren't you going to drop me off at school today?"

FENSTON

00:05:17 She turned the car around, and everyone got to where they were going. But in slightly different circumstances, that day could have ended disastrously. On average, more than 30 children die in hot cars each year, nationwide. This year, we're on track for a higher number.

CARR

00:05:32 I wish I could explain why we're seeing increased numbers as compared to where we were at this point last year. To date, there have been 23 children who have lost their lives in a hot vehicle this year.

FENSTON

00:05:45 Last year, the number was 14 by late July. So what can be done to prevent these deaths? Some say bringing charges against negligent parents is part of the answer. Paul Ebert has prosecuted two such high-profile cases in the past decade. He is the Commonwealth's Attorney in Prince William County, Va.

MR. PAUL EBERT

00:06:02 Crimes that are accidents, whether it be this type of crime or vehicular manslaughter or things of that nature, are always hard to prosecute and there are always two sides to the story. But they are crimes, and they let the message go out, in hopes that someone else will think twice before they do the same negligent act which may cause the death or serious bodily harm to another.

FENSTON

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BALFOUR

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FENSTON

00:06:43 She didn't go to jail. The jury acquitted her, but her conscience didn't. That's why she's speaking with me. That's why she's told her story in countless interviews over the past six years.

BALFOUR

00:06:53 You know, people say, well, she should have gone to jail, or she should have her uterus removed, or, you know, she should never be allowed to have children again. But this is my penance.

FENSTON

00:07:02 To relive that day over and over and over, in public. Balfour now works with the group Kids and Cars, and she tells every parent she meets her prevention tips. Keep a teddy bear in the front seat to remind you your baby's in the back or put your cell phone, something you need, in the backseat with the baby. Kids and Cars is also pushing carmakers and Congress to embrace new technology. They say the same way your car beeps if you leave the lights on, it should beep if you've left your baby in the back seat. I'm Jacob Fenston.

BERMAN

00:07:38 Next Wednesday, July 31, is National Heatstroke Prevention Day, focusing on ending the deaths of kids in hot cars. For more information visit our website, metroconnection.org.

BERMAN

00:07:54 Time for a break, but when we get back we'll meet the local scientists who track pandemics halfway around the world.

DR. ANTHONY FAUCI

00:08:01 The fundamental reason why it's different than rheumatoid arthritis and cancer and heart disease, is that all those are very, very serious diseases, they don't change much from one year to another.

BERMAN

00:08:14 That's coming up on "Metro Connection," here on WAMU 88.5.

ANNOUNCER

00:08:19 WAMU news coverage of labor and employment issues is made possible by your contributions and by Matthew Watson, in memory of Marjorie Watson. And support for WAMU 88.5's coverage of the environment comes from the Wallace Genetic Foundation, dedicated to the promotion of farmland preservation, the reduction of environmental toxins, and the conservation of natural resources.

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