

The lethal consequences of forgetting young children in cars

Australian Broadcasting Corporation, **Reporter: Tracy Bowden** Broadcast: 23/12/2013

It's known as 'fatal distraction' - young children forgotten and accidentally left in cars, often with lethal consequences

Transcript

TRACY BOWDEN, PRESENTER: With Australia already enduring some scorchingly-hot summer days, emergency services have renewed their warnings about leaving children in cars.

In New South Wales alone, there have been more than 70 cases of children locked in vehicles within the past six months.

Often carers were away only briefly, but there is another more alarming possibility. It seems unimaginable, but in parents' hectic lives, babies are sometimes simply forgotten.

For parents, it's part of the daily routine. Babies are strapped into their car seats and the journey begins. To daycare, the shopping centre, work and back again.

ROBYN HYNES: There's so much happening in our lives, our lives are so full, our minds are so busy.

TRACY BOWDEN: But on a hectic day, even the most important things can be forgotten.

NEWSREADER (Oct. 3): Police in Perth have described the death of a baby boy found in a car outside a daycare centre as a tragic mistake.

TRACY BOWDEN: It's been called "fatal distraction" and it happened in October in Perth.

NEWSREADER (Oct. 3): His father had arrived at the centre to pick up his son, but was told by staff that hadn't been dropped off that morning. The boy was found still strapped inside a capsule in the car. It's believed he'd been in the car all day unbeknownst to the father.

TRACY BOWDEN: The story sent a chill through parents across the country.

CHLOE CARR: My stomach dropped. I could only feel for the father. It's something that could so simply happen to anybody and it's something that you would never forgive yourself for.

LORRAINE SWART: There's actually been a lot of parents like myself who've been actually physically upset by it and have cried and just can't imagine. I remember lots of people saying they'd hug their little angel babies before they went to bed after hearing the story. And still now, today, the conversations are still going as to how it can be avoided.

KRISTIE CAVALIERO: My heart drops every time I hear of another story of a child being left behind unknowingly in the back seat of a car. ...

... She was a wonderful child. You know, we both adored her. And she had just the most beautiful giggle. And she was a little bit of a prankster. She loved rubber duckies. She had a collection of over 100 of them.

TRACY BOWDEN: When Kristie Cavaliero in Austin, Texas heard about what happened in Perth, she more than anyone could understand the parents' devastation.

KRISTIE CAVALIERO: It never gets easier to tell our story and it never gets any easier to hear about the devastation that has just entered the world of another family. So it just - it broke my heart.

TRACY BOWDEN: On May 25th, 2011, the Cavaliero family overslept, so the day's start was chaotic. Kristie's husband Brett set off for work, planning to drop their one-year-old daughter "Ray Ray" at daycare. For some reason, he drove a different way to the office.

KRISTIE CAVALIERO: Where he would ordinarily take a left-hand turn to drop our daughter off at daycare, but for unknown reasons he made a right-hand turn instead and assumed that he had already dropped her off at daycare. And it wasn't until just under three hours later when I picked my husband up for a lunch date that we recognised in conversation on the way to the restaurant that he, um - he could not remember dropping our child off at daycare.

TRACY BOWDEN: The little girl was still in her father's truck.

KRISTIE CAVALIERO: I assisted with resuscitation efforts while we awaited emergency personnel. But despite everything, um, that we did and everything the emergency personnel did and the folks at the children's hospital, one hour and 19 minutes after that first 911 call, she was proclaimed dead.

DAVID DIAMOND, DEPT OF PSYCHOLOGY, UNI. OF SOUTH FLORIDA: I'd like to dispel the idea that these are negligent and irresponsible parents.

TRACY BOWDEN: Professor David Diamond at the University of South Florida is a specialist in memory and has been studying what's termed forgotten child syndrome for six years.

DAVID DIAMOND: Anyone who is capable of forgetting anything of value, whether it is something material or a child, I mean, this is all just a part of normal human brain functioning.

TRACY BOWDEN: David Diamond says in almost every case he's studied, there's been some sort of change in the daily routine. Activities conducted almost on automatic pilot, which are controlled by one part of the brain, override the planning system controlled by another part of the brain.

DAVID DIAMOND: The habit memory system, the basal ganglia part of the brain tends to dominate. And so it actually suppresses your ability then to interfere with it and that is much more likely to happen also if a person has a poor night's sleep or if the person is very stressed.

TRACY BOWDEN: In the United States, where each year an average of 40 children die in cars, half of them because they've been forgotten, a series of awareness campaigns has been produced.

There are also child restraints with alert systems on the market. One developed by scientists at NASA has a sensor in the seat which is activated when the child is put in and deactivated when the child is removed.

CHRISTINE ERSKINE, KIDSAFE NSW: It is being looked at in Australia. I think every possible bell and whistle that you can have to help you in your day-to-day caring of children and protecting them is important.

TRACY BOWDEN: In Australia, the safety organisation Kidsafe has some simple practical tips.

CHRISTINE ERSKINE: When you put the child in, one suggestion is that you put your bag or your purse or your laptop in the back seat, so that if you're going to get out of the car, you're going to remember all your valuables that are in the back seat.

ROBYN HYNES: I can't see the top of his head even - he's that little - when I'm sitting in the front seat.

TRACY BOWDEN: Baby seats facing backwards mean a child is even less visible to the parent. Kidsafe suggests a mirror on the rear window so drivers can see the baby when they look in the rear vision mirror.

ROBYN HYNES: I can definitely see how you could forget that your baby's in the car. I mean, it sounds awful. But, honestly, he falls asleep. As soon as the car starts and we get going, he's asleep. You put the music on; you do forget.

DEBBIE DABKOWSKI: The more I thought about it, the more I realised realistically it could quite easily happen. And there's been times before where she'll be in the back seat and I haven't thought about her for 10 minutes and all of a sudden I'll freak out wondering if she's OK.

TRACY BOWDEN: Since losing their daughter "Ray Ray", Kristie Cavaliero and her husband have welcomed twins into the world. But they're determined to keep raising awareness in the hope that no other family has to endure what they have.

KRISTIE CAVALIERO: If you have ever misplaced your keys or if you've ever left your coffee maker or teapot running as you're running late for work and rushing out of the house, if you've ever left your car lights on - those kind of behaviours. If you've ever done any of those things, then this too can happen to you because it's the same memory failure involved.