

IT COULD HAVE BEEN ME

APRIL 18, 2014 Written by: [KELLY](#)



In the first of what will be many incidents of its kind this year, a [9-month-old boy died](#) after being left in a hot car in San Jose Wednesday. I have been in the camp of condemning parents, claiming negligence, before.

“What usually happens is that people get very judgmental because it’s so hard to imagine that ever happening to you. In most cases, the defense mechanism is to make monsters out of the parents that it happened to so that they can further distance themselves from thinking that something like that could happen to them. That’s just the biggest mistake anyone can make,” Janette Fennell, president of Kids and Cars,

told the San Francisco Chronicle after the most recent tragedy.

As summer approaches, and as a wake-up call to benefit the rest of us, we should all examine our potential to make an innocent yet catastrophic error— and keep this in mind as we think about others who have done so.

If you’re still not sure that this could happen to you— or if you’re sure that it could not— please read the 2010 Pulitzer Prize-winning article by Gene Weingarten, [“Fatal Distraction: Forgetting a Child in the Backseat of a Car is a Horrifying Mistake. Is It a Crime?”](#)

Even if you’re not a parent; even if you don’t live where there’s scorching hot weather. Even if you’ve never forgotten anything of import. Even if you’ve read the piece before.

It’s not just about kids and cars and summer heat. It’s about memory and being spread thin. It’s about routine and habits and the way our brains work. Haven’t you ever had an in-depth phone conversation while driving, and when you’ve arrived at your destination you’re not sure exactly how you got there, how many lights you stopped at, or the color of the car in front of you just a moment before?

The truth is, like it or not, it *could* happen to any of us.

I agree with Ms. Fennell. We’re quick to judge because it keeps “those” parents, the screw-ups, on the others side of the fence from us. We think it keeps us safe.

We are more comfortable when we can place people into categories. We prefer to think that “parents who’ve killed their babies by leaving them locked in the car” deserve their own comingled place in our hearts. There’s the drunk who went to the bar while junior roasted in the SUV, and the deadbeat who wanted to play video games rather than bring in the toddler. It’s easier to put this father from San Jose in with them, because then he’s not among us— and it couldn’t have *been* us. Or our friend, or our brother.

My husband and I vary our daily schedule greatly throughout the week. Occasionally, I have the car in the afternoons. I leave the office and head to the bank. Sometimes— more regularly as she grows— the carseat is still in the back. I know my baby is with my husband, but my heart stops as I glance in the rear-view out of habit, looking for her face. The panic makes my arms tingle. I know she’s at home. But it only takes one time.

It’s dangerous to fall into complacency. I’d rather be reminded, however uncomfortable and horrifying and nightmare-inducing it is, that no matter how much love and care I devote to my daughter, it could happen to me.

<http://thismomgig.com/2014/04/18/it-could-have-been-me/comment-page-1/#comment-171>

Comments:

[Jess APRIL 19, 2014 AT 6:03 AM](#) It could happen to any of us. I'm in the habit of checking every vehicle I walk by in the warmer months to see if a child or pet is in it. I wouldn't hesitate to bust open someone's window to get a child or pet out.

[Jess APRIL 19, 2014 AT 6:03 AM](#) But I'm also aware it could happen to any of us, which is why I keep an eye out. It takes a neighborhood.

[Kelly APRIL 19, 2014 AT 11:28 AM](#) That is such a smart approach, to hold us all accountable as a community. We do need to look out for one another rather than condemn the one who makes the error. When I read the San Jose article I thought about how terrible the neighbor who walked by three times might feel. I also gave some thought to the comments about the dangers of tinted windows. It's possible they do more harm than good.
Thanks for your thoughts!

[Janette Fennell APRIL 19, 2014 AT 10:33 AM](#) Kelly, Thank you for your wonderful article. If we can just get parents and caregivers to understand that "It could happen to me," they would put our simple (and free) "Look Before You Lock" safety tips in place. Here's the URL to this valuable information in English and Spanish.

<http://www.kidsandcars.org/userfiles/store/look-before-you-lock-en-sp.pdf>

When people read your article and take this advice to heart, you will be saving little lives.....for that we are extremely grateful.

[Kelly APRIL 19, 2014 AT 11:32 AM](#) Thank you for the link, Janette! I'm so glad you read my piece. I very much appreciate your work and the point you made of reaching out to the poor father who lost his son in San Jose. It gets so awfully hot where I am living, we wouldn't even have the benefit of thirty minutes to realize such a horrifying mistake on a summer day. We have to think proactively and keep our fellow parents in mind, as Jess points out above. Thanks again.

[Anna Giattina Lee APRIL 19, 2014 AT 2:56 PM](#) I totally agree. I am the mom of 21 children (18 adopted). I wrote a similar post a few weeks ago when tragedy struck nearby. <http://www.everykidahome.blogspot.com/2014/03/casting-blame-there-but-for-grace-of.html>

[Kelly APRIL 19, 2014 AT 3:28 PM](#) Thank you for sharing your post and experience! I'm pleased to hear that many great parents acknowledge the possibilities and hopefully stand together to support those it happens to. It's hard to admit, I'm sure, when it's happened to you, whether leaving a child in the car or making another error that brings a chorus of condemnation among our peers. But we're all human— thank you for helping to remind us!

[amygaylemitchell APRIL 19, 2014 AT 3:57 PM](#) These stories are so sad and are some of my biggest fears. My middle child was so calm and quiet during car rides (and still is) that I knew I would leave her if I didn't have a reminder. Her older brother was such a chatter in the car that when it was just her and me, I could easily daydream the whole drive. So I made a permanent sign that said "don't leave the kids" and left it in the car right by the ignition until she was old enough to unbuckle herself. Passengers would always point at the sign in surprise and chuckle, but then say, "good idea." A moment of vulnerable embarrassment saved me a lifetime of pain and guilt. Now we have a pool. So I have a large yellow sign right next to the sliding glass door reminding all the visitors to keep the door locked so my baby doesn't drown.

[Kelly APRIL 19, 2014 AT 4:14 PM](#) Wow, Amy, what a great real-world example of being humble and aware! We all should be using reminder mechanisms like this. Leaving signs for yourself doesn't show that you're a bad mom because you "might forget your kids"— they show you're a great mom because you're taking the steps to prevent disaster!
Thank you so much for sharing what you do.

[joe dorsey APRIL 19, 2014 AT 6:47 PM](#) I hope I don't offend anyone by posting here and apologies ahead of time if I do but I am an amateur inventor and have developed a very inexpensive device that can prevent a parent from forgetting their child in the backseat of a hot car called the Backseat Baby Alarm. It is a stand alone device, it works with any type of vehicle, and installation is basically "peek & stick". I know probably 80% of parents will just laugh at me or the suggestion they consider installing a safeguard like I have come up with but hope parents who have an infant they take somewhere on a daily basis will at least check it out and consider the merits.

[Kelly APRIL 19, 2014 AT 6:54 PM](#) Joe, do you have a link to information on your device?

[joe dorsey APRIL 19, 2014 AT 7:03 PM](#) Yes, and thanks for asking. It's <http://www.backseatbabyalarm.com/Field-Test.html>.