

“Forgotten Backseat Baby” Syndrome: an Unimaginable Danger

Posted by [Kristie Reeves-Cavaliero](#) on May 21, 2014



“Huh? Forgotten what???” is what I imagine you are asking after reading the title. The next question that probably comes to mind is, “what kind of idiot would forget his/her own child in a car?” As the parent survivor of a child who was tragically lost to vehicular **#heatstroke** in 2011 when her daddy forgot to drop her off at daycare that fateful morning, I WISH I could tell you that only idiots make this kind of mistake; that only a selfish monster could do such a deed.....sadly, most of the more than 600 kids who have died from being left in a hot car since 1998 were victims of what I like to

call **“forgotten backseat baby”** syndrome; a mistake committed not by idiots or monsters, but a mistake made by folks you would never in a million years imagine: caring, loving, responsible parents. Most of them took nearly every precaution to child-proof their homes and to assure that the car seat was installed correctly; many of them also took parenting classes in preparation for their bundle of joy’s arrival. Sadly, most of these parents also never imagined the remote possibility of forgetting their child in the backseat of a vehicle. In other words, folks just like YOU and ME, sadly, are capable of forgetting our most precious cargo in the backseat of our cars under the right conditions.

Your protective defense mechanisms are probably kicking in right now and you are probably saying “yeah right, not a chance lady”.but for those of you still in denial that you could make such a mistake, here is a little food for thought.

Have you ever, in a moment of multi-tasking, sleep deprivation, running late for work, or being severely fatigued after a bout of illness (you, your spouse, your kids), done any of the following?

- *Forgotten to turn off the headlights before exiting your car?* (apparently so many of us in the past drained our batteries by doing this that most cars now have automatic function of headlights, or at least have an alert that “dings” when you open the door to let you know you forgot to turn off the lights)
- *Left your ATM card in the machine after a transaction?* (again, so many of us were guilty of this behavior that now most ATM machines have quick swipe technology so that we no longer have to wait for our cards to be returned)
- *Forgotten to buckle your seatbelt?* (are you thinking of that annoying alarm right now? So many front passengers have forgotten this safety routine in the past that the auto industry has decided we need this annoying reminder to protect our front seat cargo)
- *Forgotten to turn off the coffee maker?* (note that most brands now have an auto-shut-off feature for us poor souls who just aren’t fully awake until chugging a cup o’ joe)
- *Walked into a room with a purpose to get/ do something, then arriving only to find that you couldn’t remember why you were there – no matter how hard to try?*

If you have ever been guilty of any of those behaviors (or similar cases of stress-induced memory failure), then yes, unfortunately, you too are capable of forgetting a baby in the backseat.

I WISH I could tell you only a monster could do such a thing. Unfortunately, even the best of mortals can suffer the devastating consequences of “forgotten backseat baby” syndrome under the right conditions. That’s why I advocate implementation of safety nets/ plans for ALL child transport activities to verify arrival and/ or absence in a timely manner.....EVEN if you are still in denial that you are capable of forgetting your precious backseat cargo, consider a child transport safety plan an “insurance policy” to make sure you prove me wrong.

[I lost my daughter, Sophia Rayne “Ray Ray” Cavaliero, to vehicular **#heatstroke** on Wednesday afternoon, May 25, 2011.](#)

That morning, our entire family overslept. Speaking in retrospect (after observing my 20 month old twins during the same phase of their lives), I think we overslept because it was the first time that Ray Ray finally slept through the night. We always called her our little alarm clock, because without fail she would awaken to nurse at 5:00 am, then sweetly drift back to sleep until about 7:30 am. Then we usually played with her for an hour or so before her daddy took her to daycare around 9:00 am. Ray Ray’s behavior was so predictable that I no longer set an alarm clock to awaken. That morning began with me awakening to my sweet child giving me precious kisses all over my face, followed by a glance at the clock. As I saw the time of 9:43 am, chaos ensued in my home. We had all overslept! Brett rushed to get dressed for

work; I rushed to get Ray Ray fed and dressed for daycare. The entire family then hurried to daddy's truck (I was still in PJs).

The defining event that led to Ray Ray's death due to vehicular heatstroke was something very simple: ONEWRONG TURN. My husband usually made a LEFT turn at the bottom of a major hill near our home to drop our child off at daycare (located less than 10 minutes from our home). After dropping her off, he would circle back onto the same major

highway and head to his office, less than 15 minutes from our home. That morning for unknown reasons he made a RIGHT turn at that critical intersection. As Ray Ray sat rear-facing and quietly in the backseat, he had no clue along his work route that she was still in the truck....he couldn't see her; he couldn't hear her. WHY did he make this wrong turn? We have asked this question daily for almost three years and still have no answer. What we know (through the criminal investigation) did not contribute to the wrong turn was his phone—records show that he wasn't talking, emailing, or texting.....Could you ever imagine that ONE WRONG TURN, as I am sure you have probably made a few times in your life as well, could have such devastating consequences???? We couldn't either....We still can't; but this is

our reality, like a nightmare from which we cannot awaken....cannot awaken because sadly it is not a dream.



The story I have just told to you replicates the story of more than one hundred families since 1998, as **forgotten childcare drop-off is the leading source of child hot car death** (aka child vehicular heatstroke or hyperthermia). Another resounding theme in nearly every “forgotten backseat baby” syndrome tale resulting in child hot car death is **a change in routine** on the day of the tragedy. For us, that change in routine was oversleeping, with a resultant chaotic start to our day. For other families, that change in routine was commonly an alternate person dropping the child off at daycare (one not accustomed to doing so). Other common changes in routine that we have seen in these tragedies include changes in school routine—either at the start of summer when grade school has just ended or in August at back to school time, ESPECIALLY where there are multiple siblings in the family and one starts kindergarten and the younger still needs to be dropped off at daycare.

I have shared my story with you today to commemorate the upcoming **National Heat Awareness Day** ([designated by the National Weather Service/ NOAA](#)) **this Friday, May 23, 2014**. The rate of child vehicular heatstroke tragedies begins to rise exponentially around this date, peaking in August (aka “back to school” time—remember that change in routine risk factor I alluded to earlier???) . This year for the first time, numerous national child safety advocates, *including the staff at Pediatric Safety*, will join forces to commemorate and co-promote this day. We will be posting hourly [child vehicular heatstroke facts and prevention tips](#) on social media outlets to raise public awareness of this often unrecognized danger to child passenger safety, focusing on “forgotten backseat baby” syndrome, which is every parent’s unimaginable risk and the leading cause of child hot car deaths. Please join us and help spread vital information to PREVENT child vehicular heatstroke by sharing our social media posts and encouraging your friends and family to do the same. We will be using the tag “**#heatstroke**” on all of our posts and encourage you to do the same.

Editor’s Note: We are just at the beginning of summer and 5 children have already died this year. Please reach out to everyone you know, to everyone who follows you on Twitter or Facebook or any other social media you have access to – and help us raise awareness of this terrible tragedy.

All it will take is a minute to post any one of these:

- Call 911 if you see a child alone in a car. ACT to prevent child vehicular #heatstroke
- Most kids who die of vehicular #heatstroke are accidentally forgotten in the backseat by a loving, responsible parent. #LOOKbeforeyouLOCK
- Forgotten childcare drop-off is the #1 source of child vehicular #heatstroke. #RayRaysPledge

- A child overheats 3-5 times faster than an adult. Never leave your child alone in a car. Prevent vehicular #heatstroke
- 30% of kids who died in a hot car gained access to an unlocked vehicle. Prevent vehicular #heatstroke
- The inside temperature of a car increases more than 40 degrees in less than an hour. Prevent vehicular #heatstroke
- Most kids who die in a hot car are less than 2 years of age. Prevent vehicular #heatstroke
- Most common factor associated with parents who forgot their kids in the backseat: change in routine. Prevent vehicular #heatstroke
- Is your child in daycare? Make an absence verification plan w ur provider aka #RayRaysPledge. Prevent vehicular #heatstroke
- Create reminders for all child transport activities eg: purse/ briefcase/ cellphone in backseat. Prevent vehicular #heatstroke

If we can save just one child's life, all our efforts will have been worth it.

About the Author



[Kristie Reeves-Cavaliero](#)

Dr. Reeves-Cavaliero currently works as a Senior Medical Scientist for a major biopharma company. She received her Doctor of Pharmacy (Pharm.D.) degree with Honors from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and performed her residency training in pharmacy practice with a focus in critical care at the Medical College of Virginia Hospitals of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Dr. Reeves-Cavaliero possesses more than a decade of clinical experience in both academic teaching hospitals and community hospitals, and she also has extensive experience within the pharmaceutical industry. Dr. Reeves-Cavaliero dedicates her free time to educating parents and raising community awareness of the risks of child car deaths due to heatstroke, and she serves as a Hyperthermia Awareness Parent Advocate for Safe Kids USA. Moreover, Dr. Reeves-Cavaliero is the co-founder of Ray Ray's Pledge, a program that was developed in response to the untimely death due to heatstroke of her one-year old daughter, Sophia Rayne ("Ray Ray") Cavaliero.

- See more at: <http://www.pediatricsafety.net/2014/05/forgotten-syndrome-unimaginable/#sthash.90qL7a2m.dpuf>

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