

## 8 Safety Rules You May Think You Don't Need

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As parents, we often have conflicted feelings about safety: On the one hand, we can sometimes be too cautious, overestimating our child's level of risk of a particular danger. And at the same time, we can completely dismiss certain hazards, assuming our child would never be affected. This is especially true of one particular kind of accident. Roughly 40 times each year, a child is left in a car for so long that she overheats and dies. And in about half of the cases, that child's parent is *100 percent positive* that the child is no longer in the car. The mom or dad is *absolutely certain* that she or he dropped the child at school, or day care, or brought her in the house after coming home.

It sounds implausible, but it isn't. And in our June issue, in a story called "[You'd Never Forget Your Child in the Car, Right?](#)" by [Andrea Barbalich](#), we meet three families to whom this has happened; they take us through their horrific experiences in excruciating detail. In two cases, the outcome was tragic. We also learn, from a neuroscientist who's studied hot-car deaths, what happens in the brain to allow this mistake to occur.

And equally insightful is the explanation from the psychologist who shed light on why, whenever a hot-car death makes the news, so many people find the parents involved to be irresponsible at best, monstrous at worst. (And they do—when [I blogged about this topic last year](#), among the comments were "I'd charge the parent for child endangerment," "If your kids are your ACTUAL number one priority, this doesn't happen. Period," and "Ummm, here is the deal. DON'T FORGET YOUR KID IN THE FREAKING CAR! There is no good excuse for being a bad parent!") The psychologist explains, "The idea of forgetting a child in a car is such a horrifying prospect for parents that the only way they can deal with it is to make themselves feel as different as possible from the parent who did this. That parent becomes a neglectful parent with whom you have nothing in common. Therefore, you don't have to think about this tragedy because it could never happen to you."

Last year I spoke with a father whose daughter died after he accidentally left her in his truck while he was at work. He backed up the psychologist's theory, saying that people don't pay attention to these stories, and certainly not the prevention methods—just as he hadn't before his daughter's death—because they simply don't think they need the advice.

But obviously we do, or else at least [3 children](#) wouldn't have already died in a hot car this year, before the "hot season" has even begun. So please take a moment to [read our story](#), and think about the precautions we've outlined below. Share the information with parents of young children, and caregivers, and anyone who ever has a young child in the car.

I want to take a moment to thank the families who participated in our story. They were selfless and courageous to share every last detail of the worst experience of their lives. They provided us with beautiful photos of their family. They patiently answered our many, many follow-up questions. And quite frankly they're opening themselves up to public scrutiny all over again. (There is a bright spot for one of the parents in our story: Kristie Reeves-Cavaliero, who, with her husband, went on to form [Ray Ray's Pledge](#) after their daughter's death to prevent hot-car deaths, was just this week named an Exceptional Mother of Inspiration by [KidsAndCars.org](#), an organization that also does incredible work to prevent injuries and death to children.) I'll end by quoting our editor-in-chief, Dana Points, who in her June editor's letter said of our story, "I'd like all of us parents to make it a goal to spend more time sharing the message of prevention and less time piling on when a tragedy happens."



<http://www.parents.com/blogs/parents-perspective/2014/05/09/health/8-safety-rules-you-may-think-you-dont-need/>

# You'd Never Forget Your Child In The Car, Right?

*Most of us think we're incapable of making such a horrible mistake. So did the parents in this story.*

June, 2014 vBy Andrea Barbalich from [Parents Magazine](#)



It was Day 3 of a new routine for the Edwards family. Jodie, a professor and counselor at a private university in Cincinnati, had spent the summer of 2008 working two days a week and taking care of her two children: her then 3-year-old son and her 11-month-old daughter, Jenna. On the days Edwards worked, both children stayed with a babysitter near her office.

Now it was August and classes were beginning for Edwards, and preschool was starting for her son. Jenna would be with the babysitter Monday through Friday. "I could walk over and see Jenna, nurse her, and bring her back to my office when I wasn't teaching," Edwards says.

On Wednesday, August 20, she drove her minivan to her son's Montessori school and took both children inside. "He was really worried about being in a new building, so we went in and stayed with him for 20 minutes, playing and helping him feel comfortable," she recalls.

That was the last time the three of them ever played together. Edwards brought Jenna back to the van and strapped her into her rear-facing car seat. "I was talking and singing to her," she recalls. "Five minutes into the drive Jenna started to sing in this little voice she uses when she's sleepy. I had a child-safety mirror, and when I looked in it I could see that she was going to fall asleep." Edwards thought about how much she wanted Jenna to stay asleep and finish her morning nap once she got to the babysitter's. "In a very detailed way, I visualized getting there, walking around to the backseat door, unbuckling her straps, getting her out very gingerly, and covering her ears so the babysitter's door wouldn't wake her. I pictured myself saying to the babysitter, 'Jenna's sleeping. Can I lay her in the crib?'"

For the next 15 minutes, Edwards drove toward the babysitter's. But instead of driving past her workplace and traveling another half block to the sitter's house on the next street, she pulled into her office parking lot. "I parked my car," she recalls. "My bags were in the front seat. I walked around and I got them out, and I went in to work" -- leaving Jenna in the car on a 92°F day for the next seven hours.

## Death Traps

Tragically, Jenna did not survive. She was one of 43 children who died unattended in a hot car that year. The same number of children also died that way in 2013, and since 1998, the number has ranged from 29 to 49 deaths each year. Roughly 20 percent were left in a car by a parent who, for instance, thought she'd run a "quick" errand and came out to find her child dead. Close to 30 percent entered a car without their parents' realizing it and couldn't get out. But 52 percent were left in the car accidentally. And more than half were under 2 years old.

A child is at greater risk than an adult in a hot car. That's because a small body heats up three to five times faster than an adult's would in the same circumstance. "The internal cooling system -- sweating -- isn't as effective in kids as it is in adults because an adult has more skin through which sweat can evaporate to cool the body," explains Kate Carr, CEO of Safe Kids Worldwide, a global organization devoted to preventing childhood injury.

When cooling doesn't take place quickly enough, a child's body temperature can rapidly rise to a dangerous level. If it reaches 104°F, major organs may begin to shut down. When it reaches 107°F, death from heatstroke is imminent. This can happen faster than most people think. Even on a mild, 70°F day, the inside of a car can become very hot within minutes, says Carr. "Deaths from heatstroke in cars have occurred 11 months of the year in nearly every state in the country."

## Every Parent's Nightmare

For mothers and fathers who have unintentionally left their child in a car, the aftermath couldn't be much worse: First and foremost, their child died. Second, they caused it. And third, the tragedy was completely preventable.

When Jodie Edwards realized what had happened to Jenna, she collapsed next to her minivan. "I had to lie on the ground," she recalls. "I couldn't even sit up." Emergency workers and police had arrived, news helicopters were on their way, and her baby was dead.

But before Edwards collapsed, all she felt was confusion. She'd left her office at 4 P.M., eager to pick up Jenna -- whose new photo she'd pinned to her bulletin board that day -- from the sitter's and her son from preschool. "I put my car in

reverse. As I was backing out, I looked in my rear-view mirror and I saw her." She stopped the car, ran around to the backseat while dialing 911, opened the door -- and knew that Jenna was dead.

"I couldn't figure out how she'd gotten there," she says, because she was so sure she'd dropped her off with the babysitter. She'd carried her phone everywhere that day, in case the sitter needed to reach her. "I thought, 'Who put Jenna in here?' and I even looked to see whether someone had put my boy in there too."

Frantic, she replayed the morning in her mind, and when she got to the part about asking the babysitter whether she could lay Jenna down so she wouldn't wake up, she realized she hadn't taken her. She began screaming, "No, no, no!" In the chaos of the moment, before the police took Edwards away for questioning, there was one phone call she needed to make. "I had to tell my husband what had happened," she says. "Remembering that will break my heart forever."

### **How Tragedy Strikes**

Whenever a case like this hits the media -- and it always does -- the public response is the same: How could a parent leave her child in a hot car? In most instances the child had fallen asleep, so there was no sound to remind the parent to take him out. And if a baby was in a rear-facing car seat in the backseat, there was also no visual cue: The baby's head might not have been visible over the top of the seat.

This is a relatively new problem. Prior to the early 1990s, children were routinely placed in the front seat, where it was obvious that they were in the car. In fact, from 1990 to 1992 there were only 11 known deaths of children from heatstroke after being left in a car. After that, car seats were moved to the back. This is when airbags became common and kids riding in the front seat were being killed by them -- 63 in 1995 alone. Not a single child has died due to an airbag since 2003, but at least 110 kids died of heatstroke from 2011 to 2013 -- a tenfold increase over the prior decade. So although kids are safer in cars in one way, they are more at risk in another.

But that isn't the only factor in heatstroke deaths, and safety experts stress that the backseat remains the safest place for children. Another major contributor, one that's more difficult to comprehend, relates to the brain. "These are not negligent parents who have forgotten their kids," says David Diamond, Ph.D., a neuroscientist in the psychology department at the University of South Florida, in Tampa, who has reviewed the details of many hot-car deaths and has spent time with dozens of parents who unintentionally left their child in the car.

Understanding what they did, he says, requires grasping how two very different parts of the brain work. There are the basal ganglia -- the "background system" that controls our habits. "It allows us to do things without thinking about them," Dr. Diamond says. When you're training in sports, for example, you repeat an action over and over to fine-tune your skills. Once it's time to compete, the action is automatic. "Your basal ganglia take over and you don't have to think about how to bounce or shoot the ball."

Then there are the parts of the brain that control new information: the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. The basal ganglia and prefrontal cortex essentially compete with each other, Dr. Diamond says. When you change up your routine and do something different, then the new details have to be processed by the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex to override the basal ganglia's strong desire to perform actions out of habit.

The basal ganglia play a big part in driving. "Once you've driven from Point A to Point B enough times, you can do it without thinking," Dr. Diamond says. "You might not even remember the trip." If new information enters the picture (say, your partner calls to ask you to stop at the store and buy milk), your prefrontal cortex and hippocampus have to kick into gear to incorporate it. "But it's common to drive right past the store and come home. When your partner says, 'Where's the milk?' you feel flustered because you remember the conversation, but for some reason you came home instead." Why? Because you were on autopilot. "The basal ganglia actually suppress the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus from bringing that memory to your consciousness," explains Dr. Diamond.

Stress worsens this phenomenon, he adds. "It affects how our prefrontal cortex functions and makes it more likely we'll do something out of habit." And those factors, ultimately, are what allow otherwise responsible parents to leave their child in a car. In every hot-car death Dr. Diamond has studied, something was different about the routine that day. Jodie Edwards had to make two stops instead of her usual one. In other cases, Dad drove the baby instead of Mom or there was some other extra stress. And the basal ganglia won control.

### **One Wrong Turn**

It's one thing to forget a gallon of milk and quite another to forget a child? ... isn't it? Dr. Diamond has been challenged in this way many times. "As a parent I sympathize with that view," he says. "But as a scientist I can tell you that the basal ganglia can suppress all kinds of memories, even of things that are the most important to us."

Brett Cavaliero, a 45-year-old father from Austin, Texas, lived this firsthand. On May 25, 2011, ten days after his daughter Sophia's first birthday, he and his wife, Kristie, dressed her in a bright, flowery dress that had been a gift from one of her child-care teachers. He strapped her into her car seat in the backseat of his truck and started driving. He was running late, he had work on his mind, and Sophia was sleeping. "I drove down this giant hill, and at the bottom of the hill I would ordinarily make a left-hand turn, drop her off, and circle back to go to work," he says. But that day he didn't. "When I came to that traffic light, I made a right-hand turn and kept driving to work. Sophia was sleeping in the back. My mind went on autopilot and I drove to work."

When he arrived, some of his colleagues were talking in the parking lot. He joined in and walked with them into the building, leaving Sophia in the truck. No one saw her through the tinted windows designed to keep cars cooler in the Texas sun.

Three hours later, Kristie came to her husband's office to pick him up for a quick lunch. "We were driving down the road in my wife's car, and we were talking about how beautiful Sophia looked that day in her flowery dress," he recalls.

"Suddenly shock came over me and I said, 'I don't remember what her teacher said about her wearing the dress she got her.'" And then it hit him: He couldn't recall dropping her off. "I said, 'Just drive back to my office as fast as you can.' I could barely get the words out, but she understood and she called the child-care center to find out if Sophia was there. They said no, she never came in." Kristie called 911 while Brett frantically called a coworker to ask her to see whether Sophia was in his truck.

An hour and 19 minutes later -- after the Cavalieros had arrived on the scene to find Brett's colleagues performing CPR and after an ambulance had taken the baby to the hospital -- Sophia was pronounced dead.

To this day, Brett isn't certain what made him turn right instead of left at that traffic light. He's not sure whether he would have remembered his daughter if his coworkers hadn't been in the parking lot. He does know one thing: "I made a terrible mistake," he says. "I remember screaming on the ground begging God to take my life, not hers. I would've done anything in the whole world to save her."

### **A Brutal Backlash**

For parents whose children die, there is crushing grief and guilt. Sometimes, there are also serious legal repercussions. In 49 percent of all hot-car deaths, charges were filed against the adults who left the child in the car; 81 percent of those cases resulted in a conviction.

There is also, unfailingly, judgment and blame from the media, friends, neighbors, and perfect strangers.

When *Parents* published a short article on this topic online last August, many mothers posted outraged comments, such as these: "Irresponsible people trying to make excuses!" "People who do forget [their kids] should get their priorities straight." "Ummm, here is the deal. DON'T FORGET YOUR KID IN THE FREAKING CAR! There is no good excuse for being a bad parent!" And even this: "I am suspicious that these parents might have committed this crime as an easy way to lose unwanted children."

Beneath this harsh judgment is a desire for self-protection, explains Janet Brown Lobel, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in New York City and Pleasantville, New York. "The idea of forgetting a child in a car is such a horrifying prospect for parents that the only way they can deal with it is to make themselves feel as different as possible from the parent who did this," she says. "That parent becomes a neglectful parent with whom you have nothing in common. Therefore, you don't have to think about this tragedy because it could never happen to you."

Janette Fennell, founder and president of KidsAndCars.org, a national nonprofit focused on keeping children safe in and around vehicles, agrees: "People try to demonize these parents. The logic goes: 'These people are monsters. I'm not a monster, so it won't happen to me,' and that is the biggest mistake anyone can make."

A month before Jenna was born, Jodie Edwards saw a news story on TV about a baby who had died after being left in a hot car. Although she had checked out stacks of books from the library in preparation for motherhood and paid special attention to the chapters on safety, the heatstroke story didn't worry her. "I didn't think it was a safety issue I would be vulnerable to," she says.

Nicolle Holmes-Gulick, a 33-year-old mother in Shoreline, Washington, was just as safety-conscious: "the kind of parent people relax around because I'm the one watching their kids like a hawk," as she puts it. But one afternoon in August 2013, her house was more chaotic than usual. Her mother was there and her sister, with her two young children, had just arrived from out of town for a visit. Holmes-Gulick had to get her 13-year-old daughter to her first cheerleading practice of the season, and the clock was ticking. She'd been planning to leave her 21-month-old daughter, Presley, with her mother, but the toddler was fussy, so she wound up taking her too. "Two minutes after we started down the road,

Presley fell asleep," Holmes-Gulick recalls. "And when we got there my oldest said, 'You have to come with me. It's my first day.'"

So she got out of the car and walked to the park with her older daughter. "I talked to the coach and the other mothers," she recalls. "Then one of my girlfriends asked me, 'Where's Presley?'" Horrified, Holmes-Gulick shouted, "Oh my God, I forgot my baby!" She ran to the car to find Presley sweaty and screaming. The little girl was fine -- but Holmes-Gulick wasn't. "I cried about 20 times that day," she says. Presley was in the car for eight minutes on an 85°F day, and Holmes-Gulick knows what could have happened if her friend hadn't said something. Being as cautious as she was, she never dreamed that could happen to her.

She's also amazed by how many other parents have told her they've done something similar. "When I talk with my friends about it, everybody opens up," she says. "People are insecure about their parenting and they aren't going to say 'I did that' until someone else does. This happens to a lot more people than we think."

### **The Aftermath**

When Sophia Cavaliero died, her father was questioned by police. Charges were never filed against him, but that didn't provide much solace. "I thought, 'It doesn't matter where you put me or what you do to me. I'll live with this horror every single minute of every day and there's nothing you can do to me that will be worse than this,'" says Cavaliero. He never thought he would learn to manage his grief. But he's getting there, with the help of his wife, who never blamed him, and supportive family and friends. He and Kristie are now the parents of 20-month-old twin girls.

Jodie Edwards wasn't charged either, but that didn't ease her grief in the least. "I have a sadness that will always be there. I just miss Jenna," she says.

When she was waiting to be interviewed by the police, there was a part of her that wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. "I wanted to die," she says, "but I couldn't." She had a 3-year-old son to take care of. "I refused to let his life be ruined by this, so I made a commitment right then to do whatever I could to be a healthy parent for him." Her son is now 8 and has another sister and brother, ages 4 and 2 1/2. "They're all beautiful and happy. And they know about Jenna," Edwards says.

"We have pictures of her all over the house," she says. "We talk about her all the time and make sure she's a part of every celebration in some way." Every year on Jenna's birthday, they do something they think she would have liked at the age she would've been. Two years ago they visited a butterfly garden; last year it was the zoo.

But Edwards believes that the greatest tribute she can make to her firstborn daughter is to do everything she can to raise awareness of how she died -- and to help other parents understand that they could make the same mistake she did, even if they think it's impossible. "I thought love would make me immune to such a tragedy," she says. "But it didn't."

### **7 Ways to Not Forget Your Child**

"We all spend a great deal of time and money to childproof our home," says Janette Fennell, founder and president of KidsAndCars.org. "We need to childproof our car with the same care."

She advises taking multiple steps to make sure you always remember your child in the car:

1. Be extra alert if your routine changes. That's when the risk of unintentionally leaving your child in your car increases.
2. Put something of your child's, like a toy, on the front seat.
3. Leave an item you'll need at your next destination in the backseat -- like your cell phone, purse, or briefcase.
4. Place your child's car seat in the middle of the backseat rather than behind the driver. It's easier to see the kid.
5. It's crucial to set up a system with your child-care provider, as the parents in this story can attest. If you don't plan to drop off your child that day, call her. If the child doesn't arrive as expected, have the caregiver call you.
6. Discuss the topic of hot-car deaths with every person who drives your child anywhere. This includes partners, grandparents, and babysitters.
7. Always "Look Before You Lock." Get in the habit of checking the backseat every time you get out of the car. Finally, if you see any child in a car seat alone in a car, call 911.

### **Hotter Than You Realize**

This is how quickly the temperature inside a vehicle rises on a 70°F day, based on research by Jan Null, department of earth and climate sciences, San Francisco State University. Null also found that keeping the windows open slightly had little effect and that car interiors with darker colors heat up faster.

After 10 minutes = 89°F  
After 20 minutes = 99°F  
After 30 minutes = 104°F  
After 60 minutes = 113°F  
After 2 hours = 120°F

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<http://www.parents.com/baby/safety/car/danger-of-hot-car-for-children/>