

Unlocking The Door: How Can We Prevent Children Being Left in Cars?

by [Alice Bagley](#) on JUNE 23, 2014 in [BABIES](#), [KIDS](#), [PARENTING](#)



This is a blog post I didn't want to write.

As a mother, there are some things that are beyond my comprehension. There are places that I absolutely cannot let my mind go. I just *can't*.

One of those places – the one none of us like talking about; most of us can't even THINK about – is losing a child. We stay in our happy places, our “*it can't happen to me*” zones, until reality makes it all too clear that it does happen.

Way more often than it should.

We use carseats to protect our children, but we also must remember they can become deadly when a child is left in a locked car.

The thought of a child suffering – it is almost more than I can bear. So I usually don't allow myself to even go there. But just a few days ago, my newsfeed filled up with a horrifying story. Justin Ross Harris, father to a 22-month-old toddler, accidentally left his child locked in his car when he went to work. Eight hours later he discovered his son. Dead. Two days later he has been charged with murder.

There are a lot of strong feelings and huge opinions around this story. And there should be. A child is dead.

A child. is. DEAD.

It is still hard for me to wrap my head around those words.

It is difficult to even type them.

A father has been charged with murder. I don't know Justin Ross Harris, yet, in my heart of hearts, I have to believe that there is nothing – **NOTHING** – the criminal justice system can do to him that will even come close to the hell he has sentenced himself to live in.

There are more questions than answers. More grief than understanding. More anguish than most of us can imagine. When my son, Austin, was born, I was very hesitant to put him in daycare. I worried about who would take care of him, how he would be treated, if anyone could ever care for him like I did. I was lucky that I didn't have to put him in daycare until he was almost a year old.

One of the first things my husband and I agreed on was that we didn't want Austin to go on any “outings” with his daycare. A few years ago, there seemed to be a rash of deaths due to infants and small children being left in daycare vans and buses. The thought of that horrified me. It still does.

So we were adamant about Austin not being transported anywhere, but by us. He is at a wonderful daycare – and now at almost 5-years-old, I know I'm about to relinquish some of the transportation responsibilities to his caregivers when he starts “big boy” school this fall. I have driven them crazy with questions about how they transport, what safety measures they have in place, looking up their safety records with the state. And then questioning them some more.

As a parent – that's what we do. We do everything we can to ensure our children are safe. I work very hard to make sure that when Austin is not in our hands, that he has the *best* possible people with the *best* possible training with the *best* possible tools looking after him. But sometimes I think that we are so busy making sure everyone else prioritizes safety that we don't see that the biggest danger to our children are those who love them most.

I would like to tell you that Justin Ross Harris made a mistake that I would NEVER make. And –granted – I haven't. But if I can be brutally honest here for a minute – it could have been me. And I would venture to say that it could have been most of you reading this right now.

I read the Pulitzer Prize winning article, [Fatal Distraction](#). I encourage all of you to read it when you have time. It will change your mind about the “type” of parents who lose their children in this way. Most parents this happens to are considered “good” parents with no prior charges of abuse or neglect. Often these are the parents that waited so long to have a child and have gone to extremes to create a safe environment. According to the experts in this article, the recipe for disaster is often: a change in schedule, distraction while driving (i.e. cell phone use, multitasking, trying to handle work or family situations, etc.), lack of sleep, and stress.

I have had a combination of all of those factors before. On many occasions. My husband's schedule changes from week to week – and often there is no rhyme or reason as to who takes and/or picks up Austin each day. I have gone into work

worrying about completing a project or stressing over a sick family member. Because my husband sometimes works overnights – there are plenty of days when I know I haven't had as much rest as I should.

I can't tell you why my son is still alive and Justin Harris' is not. I never left Austin unattended in a car – neither consciously or unconsciously. Before a few days ago, I'm sure Mr. Harris would have said the same thing. Sometimes it comes down to dumb luck. As a mother, I am not proud to say that. But as a parent I feel it is **NECESSARY** to say – because we never think we'll be the ones to do harm.

According to Kidsandcars.org, a nonprofit child safety organization dedicated to preventing injuries and death to children in or around motor vehicles, In 2014– there have already been **13 deaths** due to heatstroke in the United States. I don't know if Justin Harris' son is part of these statistics or not. My guess is that Mr. Harris doesn't care if his son is number 13 or 14. I imagine that the numbers don't really matter when your child has died.

There is nothing I can do for Justin Harris and his family other than pray. But for the rest of us – there is a chance to make smarter choices. To put into place safety practices in our own cars that we would expect of anyone else caring for our children. Let's not bury our heads in the sand and say it can't happen to me.

It can happen.

And it does.

As the weather heats up to ridiculously hot temperatures these next few months – let's agree we're ALL going to put the following safety measures in place:

Safety Tips from KidsAndCars.org:

- **Never leave children alone** in or around cars; not even for a minute.
- **Put something you'll need like your cell phone**, handbag, employee ID or brief case, etc., on the floor board in the back seat.
- **Get in the habit of always opening the back door** of your vehicle every time you reach your destination to make sure no child has been left behind. This will soon become a habit.
- **Keep a large stuffed animal in the child's car seat** when it's not occupied. When the child is placed in the seat, put the stuffed animal in the front passenger seat. It's a visual reminder that anytime the stuffed animal is up front you know the child is in the back seat in a child safety seat.
- **Make arrangements with your child's day care center or babysitter that you will always call** if your child will not be there on a particular day as scheduled.
- **Keep vehicles locked at all times**; even in the garage or driveway and always set your parking brake.
- **Keys and/or remote openers should never be left** within reach of children.
- **Make sure all child passengers have left the vehicle** after it is parked.
- **When a child is missing**, check vehicles and car trunks immediately.
- **If you see a child alone in a vehicle**, get involved. If they are hot or seem sick, get them out as quickly as possible.
- Call 911 or your local emergency number immediately.
- Be especially careful about keeping children safe in and around cars **during busy times, schedule change and periods of crisis or holidays.**
- **Use drive-thru services** when available. (restaurants, banks, pharmacies, dry cleaners, etc.)
- **Use your debit or credit card** to pay for gas at the pump.

For more information on child and car safety (including free downloads), please visit: www.kidsandcars.org.

<http://citymomsblog.com/atlanta/unlocking-the-door-how-can-we-prevent-children-being-left-in-cars/>

About Alice Bagley

Alice is a Georgia-native who has a ridiculously large shoe collection; can make the holy trinity of southern cuisine: sweet tea, cornbread and peach cobbler; and finally wears her yoga pants to actual yoga classes. She is a graduate of the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and currently provides public relations for a faith-based social services agency for children in Georgia. She is married to the funniest guy she knows - Ervin. They are parents to Austin, 4 and Erin, 17.