

Kelly: Extra look before backing up can save kid's life

5/28/2012 By Michael Kelly WORLD-HERALD COLUMNIST

Few accidents are sadder or more horrific than when a child is run over by a parent, a grandparent, a neighbor or a friend — and yet they continue to happen.

According to the nonprofit KidsAndCars.org, two children die and about 50 are injured each week in America, on average, when someone runs over them in a vehicle.

Often called “backover” accidents because many occur in driveways as the driver is backing out, they happen going forward, too. That's what occurred Wednesday in Fremont, Neb., when a 37-year-old father didn't see that his 2-year-old had wandered in front of his pickup truck.

Ten days ago, a 2-year-old Lincoln girl was seriously injured when her mother was backing out of their driveway.

Last month in Omaha, a 3-year-old boy was sitting on a cousin's lap in the driver's seat of a minivan in a church parking. When the gear shifted out of park, the child fell out and under the vehicle and was killed.

Riding lawn mowers also have resulted in accidents. Steve Villamonte, who lives near Plattsmouth, is grateful that his 2-year-old daughter survived last year when he accidentally ran over her.

“I was in complete panic mode,” he recalled, fearful that she would be “shredded to pieces by the blades.”

Fortunately, the blades weren't engaged. But a tire of the mower, with Villamonte in the seat, drove over his child's head. He lifted and pushed the mower over and picked up little Justine, who had “screamed hysterically” at first but now seemed to drift in and out of consciousness. A neighbor drove them to the Bellevue Medical Center, where a CT scan showed she was OK. She had received only a cut on her face and a scrape on her back.

This spring, in hopes of warning other parents how quickly a tragedy can happen, Villamonte took part in a video made by the Nebraska Medical Center.

Villamonte, 50, executive director of the Omaha Press Club, has two grown children from a first marriage and is enjoying a second family — Justine is now 3 and Gabriel is 6.



On the day before Easter last year, he was riding with them on his lap on the mower. He saw a patch of grass he had missed, and stopped to lift Justine out on his left, guiding her away; when his son also got off on the left, Steve's foot inadvertently slipped off the brake.

In that second or two, the girl had stepped in front of the mower — which lurched forward and on top of her.

In the aftermath, despite his relief, Steve felt guilt and “utter stupidity.” Never again, he said, will he give the children rides on the mower — he says he won't even let them outside when he is mowing.

Steve Villamonte and daughter Justine.

Not long after his family's close call, he said, he wept as he read of a Nebraska child who was killed in a mower accident. Many tears have been shed by families who have suffered searing grief from backover or similar accidents at home.

Kay Farrell, president and CEO of the Greater Omaha chapter of the National Safety Council, said that because such tragedies often occur on private property, the totals for Nebraska aren't clear.

Such accidents don't just happen at home. She said companies and agencies emphasize to their drivers to be extra careful when backing. Some require that orange cones be placed behind vehicles.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration offers prevention tips, such as:

» Teach children not to play in or around cars, and to move away when a car is started. Drivers should always walk around the vehicle and check the area before backing up.

» Be especially aware of small children. Roll down your windows so you can hear. Actively check rearview mirrors.

More and more vehicles are equipped with rearview cameras — now standard on 45 percent of cars and trucks in the current model year.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood told congressional leaders in February that details of a rule mandating rearview cameras on all passenger vehicles will not be complete until the end of the year.

The rule is intended to protect children and others from the “blind spot” that drivers can't see as they are backing up.

But even with all the tips and technological advances and with all our good intentions, trauma can result the one time we are rushing and fail to make certain the way is clear.

Riding mowers, cars and trucks can be dangerous. We all need to take extra seconds and extra care.

As KidsAndCars.org advises: "Before you turn the key, make sure you can see."

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