

Special Report: 2-year-old run over by vehicle could have been saved

'Mommy!' the boy said as the vehicle began to roll. And then, 'It just went silent.'

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A framed photograph of Kordyn Haas hangs in the living room of his family's home in Lafayette. On Oct. 24, Kordyn died when an SUV ran over the toddler after he fell from the driver's seat. / By John Terhune/Journal & Courier

Keeping kids safe

It doesn't take long for a child to unintentionally set a car into motion, particularly if the keys are left in the vehicle.

Here are some prevention tips:

- Teach children not to play in or around cars
- Supervise children carefully when in and around vehicles
- Keep vehicles locked when unattended
- Never leave keys in the car
- Engage the emergency brake every time you park

Source: National Highway Transportation Safety Administration



Special report

Testing for Safety: J&C Projects Editor Dave Smith explains how to test for brake transmission shift interlock in your vehicle.

A Lafayette 2-year-old boy who was run over and killed Oct. 24 by the family vehicle after he accidentally shifted it out of park could have been saved had the vehicle been equipped with a basic safety device now required on all new vehicles — the brake-shift interlock.

Wednesday, Oct. 24, was an unseasonably warm and sunny day in Lafayette, ideal conditions for a mother and son to spend the afternoon outside.

On a residential street that ends in a cul-de-sac on Lafayette's south side, Sara Metcalf-Haas had parked her 2000 Dodge Durango in the driveway and was giving the vehicle a thorough cleaning with the help of her 2-year-old son, Kordyn.



Corey Haas and his wife, Sara Metcalf-Haas. 'Who has not let their kid run around the vehicle, you know, when they're cleaning or whatnot?' she says. 'I had never guessed that something like this would have happened. Ever.' / John Terhune/Journal & Courier

Sara, 28, was in the back seat, brushing bits of dirt and crumbs off the carpet, while Kordyn stood in the front driver's seat. He had a washcloth and was helping wipe down the interior.

"He was doing what he liked. He liked to help," she said. The radio was playing, meaning the key was turned to the accessory position, police later said.

"All of a sudden, Kordyn says, 'Mommy,' and it just starts rolling."

Mimicking a motion he'd seen dozens of times, Kordyn had pulled on the gearshift. And on that make, model and year — as on many other makes, models and years — it was not necessary to press the brake pedal before slipping the transmission out of park.

More about the story:

» [A look at several similar incidents during the past 18 years](#)

» [Toddler dies after being hit by car in Lafayette \(Oct. 24, 2012\)](#)

The big SUV, its driver's door open, lurched backward down the sloping driveway.

"He's still standing up, and I'm yelling at him, 'Sit down, Kordyn!' " his mother said.

And then, "It just went silent. I didn't hear anything."

By the time the car stopped in the middle of Regent Court, Kordyn was lying at the foot of the driveway, his head crushed.



Photographs of Kordyn Haas in his family's Lafayette home. On October, 24, Kordyn was with his mother Sara Metcalf-Haas, inside the family's 2000 Dodge Durango as she was cleaning the SUV. Investigators believe the two-year-old boy may have accidentally shifted the vehicle from park to neutral. Kordyn died when the SUV ran over the toddler after he fell from the driver's seat / John Terhune/Journal & Courier

His father, Corey Haas, an auto mechanic and deputy chief of the Wea Township Fire Department, rushed home from his job at Mike Raisor Ford to a scene 14 years of emergency responding had not — could not — prepare him for.



“Nothing will ever prepare you to walk up and see your own child and not be able to do anything for him,” Haas, 32, said. He said the coroner later told him his son had a broken vertebra in his neck, meaning he likely died before the SUV ran over him. Kordyn’s parents believe their son’s death could have been prevented had their Dodge Durango been equipped with a simple yet effective mechanism — a brake-shift interlock — that prevents the shift lever from moving out of park until the brake pedal is depressed. Auto safety experts have been saying that for years, and in 2006, automakers agreed to equip all vehicles sold in the United States with brake-shift interlock by late 2010. But in the absence of a vehicle recall or massive public awareness campaign — neither of which has the government ordered or automakers offered — such accidents are likely to happen with chilling regularity until all vehicles without brake-shift interlock are mothballed.

With the average age of U.S. vehicles at 10.6 years in 2011 and increasing annually, that could take decades. Safety experts stress the importance of never letting children play in vehicles, especially if keys are in the ignition. And setting the parking brake should prevent unintended vehicle motion.

ROLLAWAY THREAT?

Many cars on the road today lack a brake transmission system interlock, or BTSI, that can prevent a child or adult from unintentionally setting a vehicle in motion. BTSI prevents movement of an automatic transmission from “park” until the brake pedal is pressed.

On vehicles without BTSI, a child can easily shift into neutral or drive without pressing the brake pedal provided the key has been left in the ignition and turned to an on position.

BTSI devices have been required on all vehicles sold in the United States only since 2010. To tell if your vehicle is equipped with the safety device, see box below.

HOW SAFE IS YOUR CAR?

- ▶ Park your vehicle on a level surface and set the parking brake.
- ▶ Make sure no one is standing in front of or behind the vehicle.
- ▶ Insert the key in the ignition and turn to the first position (radio will not turn on).
- ▶ Do not touch the brake and see if you shift out of “park.”
- ▶ Repeat the fourth step in the next two key positions, including with the engine on.
- ▶ If you can shift from park in any key position without pressing the brake, your vehicle lacks BTSI in all key positions and could pose a rollaway threat.

Whether your vehicle has or doesn't have BTSI, never leave a child unsupervised in a vehicle, don't let children play behind the wheel — especially when keys are in the ignition — and remember to set the parking brake, experts say.

SOURCE: KidsAndCars.org
THOMAS MANFIELD, DAVID SMITH/JOURNAL & COURIER

Yet despite such warnings, deaths and injuries keep occurring. According to KidsAndCars.org, a Kansas City, Mo.-based nonprofit that monitors child-related vehicle safety issues, incidents involving vehicles unintentionally set in motion resulted in 155 child deaths from 2000 through 2011.

Indiana had 14 such incidents involving 25 children during that time period. None were fatal.

Why a safety feature was absent

The brake-shift interlock is a device that has been around so many years, even some transportation safety experts are surprised to find they aren't universal.

Fred Mannering, the Charles Pankow Professor of Civil Engineering at Purdue University, said he purchased a 1992 Mazda Miata that came equipped with brake-shift interlock as standard equipment.

Mannering, who has written or co-authored numerous studies on automobile and transportation safety, remembers thinking it was an unusual safety feature for a car not commonly associated with soccer moms and children.

“Why would you put an interlock on a sports car?” he said. “I figured by 1992, everyone had them.”

Brake-shift interlock first began appearing on Audi models in the mid-1980s in response to cases of sudden acceleration resulting in injury and death, according to Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety in Washington, D.C.

Other automakers followed suit, voluntarily at first; the device wasn't required by federal regulation until 2007, and even then it was phased in.

“We have fought the government over these voluntary agreements,” said Ditlow, co-author of “Sudden Acceleration: The Myth of Driver Error.”

GM and Ford began installing the device on its most popular models by the mid-1990s, according to one expert. But Chrysler didn't begin equipping the Dodge Durango, Dakota pickup truck or its popular Plymouth Voyager, Dodge Caravan and Chrysler Town & Country with brake-shift interlock until the 2001 model year — at least 15 years after the safety device first appeared on the scene.

Mike Palese, a Chrysler spokesman, defended the company's safety record and said the 2000 Dodge Durango already had a safety feature intended to prevent unintended vehicle movement: the key shift interlock.

"This vehicle was equipped with a key shift interlock system — a safety device that guarantees that a child cannot shift a vehicle out of park when the key is removed."

"Children should never be allowed to play in a vehicle," he added.

The federal government required key shift interlock on all vehicles made after 1992, so automakers had no choice but to install it.

Sgt. Max Smith, who is in charge of the Lafayette Police Department Traffic Division, said LPD officers who responded found the Durango in the street with the radio on and the key turned to the accessory position.

With the key turned to the accessory position, the only safety feature that could have prevented a child from shifting it out of park would have been a brake-shift interlock. LPD officers who checked the vehicle confirmed the absence of such a feature:

"When testing the gear shift on (the Durango), it was an automatic shift and could be shifted in and out of gear without depressing the brake pedal," the crash report stated.

Insidious problem

Paul Sheridan, a general management automotive safety expert and former Chrysler Corp. safety team leader, said he tried to get the company to install brake-shift interlocks on Chrysler minivans in the mid-1990s because Ford's newest minivan, the Windstar, was so equipped.

Sheridan, of Dearborn, Mich., has testified in lawsuits against Chrysler on numerous occasions. He said the absence of brake-shift interlock on any vehicle is "insidious" because drivers may assume their vehicles have it when in fact they may not.

"All their lives they've been trained to put their foot on the brake (before shifting)," he said. "The insidious part is, you don't know you don't have it."

Amber Rollins, director KidsAndCars.org, agrees.

"A lot of people aren't aware of it at all. It's very dangerous," she said. "People think that it could never happen. One little kick and the car can shift in gear."

Sheridan was chairman of a minivan safety team that in 1994 sought to make sure Chrysler's minivan lived up to its billing as a safe family vehicle. The team noted that Ford's Windstar, a main competitor, was equipped with brake-shift interlock.

Sheridan said he argued that Chrysler would be remiss if it didn't also offer the safety feature, particularly since the necessary parts would cost less than \$1 million to develop and less than \$9 per vehicle.

Higher-ups, however, rejected the recommendation, saying the part would have to be added to all Chrysler vehicles — Durango included — at an upfront development cost of \$10 million.

"It was strictly a money issue. The federal government didn't require it," Sheridan said.

Palese, however, said that line of argument doesn't fly because the company's vehicles already had a device to prevent unintended vehicle movement — the ignition shift interlock.

"Chrysler Group takes safety very seriously and never trades vehicle and customer safety for cost," he told the Journal & Courier.

Chrysler terminated Sheridan and later sued him for leaking confidential documents.

One civil lawsuit in which Sheridan testified on behalf of the plaintiff centered on the death of a 31-year-old schoolteacher from South Carolina who was killed in 1998 after her 1997 Dodge Caravan rolled over her. Frances Kimberly Golden, 31, was pregnant with twins at the time, and the unborn children also died.

Golden was standing on her porch, and her 4-year old daughter was in the vehicle. When the mother saw the van with her daughter in it start to roll backward down the driveway, she instinctively ran to stop it. She slipped on the rain-soaked pavement and fell under the front tire.

Peter Perlman, a Lexington, Ky., attorney for Golden's widower, said the company claimed the 4-year-old shifted the car, and therefore the company was not responsible.

"Our position was it should have been designed with a brake-shift interlock." The case was settled out of court for an undisclosed amount, he said.

The case was prominently featured in a 2001 "ABC PrimeTime" report that focused national attention on the brake-shift interlock issue.

It wasn't until 2006 that automakers, Chrysler among them, reached an agreement with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to equip all new vehicles made after Sept. 1, 2010, with brake-shift interlock.

The voluntary agreement was codified in 2007 with the passage of the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act. According to testimony on that bill, 20 percent of vehicles in production at that time still lacked brake-shift interlock. If so, roughly 25 million vehicles made before 2006 and still in operation lack the safety feature.

Warning needed

Sheridan said that given the number of vehicles still on the road without brake-shift interlock, there's no doubt in his mind tragedies involving unintentional vehicle movement will continue to occur.

"My perception on any safety defect is that it has a finite possibility of occurrence. When it happens to you, it's 100 percent."

Palese said he's not aware of any after-market product a consumer can buy to retrofit brake-shift interlock on Dodge Durangos or Chrysler minivans built prior to 2001. He reiterated the need for consumers to take advantage of the vehicles' existing safety features and closely watch children in or around vehicles.

Terri Jones, a childbirth educator and certified child passenger safety technician at IU Health Arnett Hospital in Lafayette, said it's common for young parents in particular to own vehicles made in 2000 or earlier.

Although Jones knows the ins and outs of car seat safety, she admitted to unfamiliarity with the brake-shift interlock issue.

"I think I definitely need to do some more research, because if I'm putting a car seat in a Durango, maybe I should be warning those parents," she said.

KidsAndCars.org recommends that owners of vehicles made prior to model year 2010 test their vehicles to make sure they have brake-shift interlock. Before performing such a test, however, a vehicle owner should set the parking brake — a precaution that can prevent unintended rollaways.

The first order of caution, however, is to watch children closely around vehicles, Jones said.

"Allowing kids to play any place in the car is dangerous," she said.

Kordyn's mother, Sara Metcalf-Haas, she said she had no idea her silver Dodge Durango could be shifted into neutral without someone's foot pressing on the brake.

"Who has not let their kid run around the vehicle, you know, when they're cleaning or whatnot?"

"I had never guessed that something like this would have happened. Ever."

Ditlow said automakers might have predicted that drivers are not perfect — that children might sometimes climb into an unattended vehicle or be left alone, however momentarily. In short, that parents might let their guard down now and again.

"The industry viewed this as an extra cost because the safety benefits could be reaped if the driver never made a mistake," he said.

"It's very difficult to explain to a parent why your child died even though there is a known technology to prevent that from happening and the government did not issue a regulation to require it."

Epilogue

Kordyn was not an only child. Corey and Sara Metcalf-Haas have seven children — his, hers and theirs — who will keep them occupied for years to come.

But Haas said he'll always miss that special homecoming Kordyn gave him after a hard day's work.

"Every day I'd walk in the door — 'Hi, Daddy' with a big smile," he said.

"The only time he was mad at me was when I told him it was time to go to bed. He said he'd be good if he didn't have to go to bed."

Kordyn was a happy child, perfectly content to pedal the toy John Deere tractor his grandmother gave him, pulling a trailer behind him. At his funeral, the family passed around stickers with his picture that said, "Rest in Peace My Little Fire Buddy."

Corey Haas said he's talked to a lawyer but doesn't know if or when he will contemplate taking legal action. For now, he and Sara only hope their experience serves as a red flag for parents who find themselves in a similar situation.

"I don't want another kid hurt by one of these vehicles, and if I can do anything to stop it, I'm going to."

http://www.jonline.com/article/20121201/NEWS/312010040/2-year-old-killed-by-car-could-have-been-saved-by-brake-shift-interlock?odyssey=tab%7Ctopnews%7Ctext%7CFRONTPAGE&nclick_check=1

A look at several incidents during the past 18 years in which vehicles have been set in motion by children with fatal results...

Nov. 30, 1984, North Lauderdale, Fla.

Jamin Jacobson, 3, was struck and killed by the family's 1972 Chevy Impala in his driveway. The boy's mother had parked the car in the driveway and gone inside the house with the boy's baby sister, leaving him alone in the car. Police believe he shifted the car out of park. As it began rolling backward, he jumped or fell out of the driver's door. The car ran over him, causing head injuries from which he did not recover. — *The Miami Herald*

Aug. 5, 1988, Orange County, Calif.

Dylan Clark Bloodworth, 2, of Arlington, Texas, was killed when a runaway 1981 Chevy station wagon ran into him in San Clemente State Park. Police said an 18-month-old child, left alone in a car with the engine running, shifted the car into gear while the engine was running. The driver told police she had gotten out of the car to retrieve some camping items and left the engine running because the car was difficult to start. — *The Orange County Register*

May 30, 1998, Washington, Mo.

Harrison Struttmann, 2, was killed and his mother seriously injured by a runaway van in a riverfront park. Two boys, ages 2 and 3, had been left unsupervised in a 1985 full-size Dodge van that had been left idling. After recovering from her injuries, Michele Struttmann co-founded Kids 'N Cars, a nonprofit organization that promotes safety issues. Partly as a result of her lobbying, 17 states now have laws against leaving children unattended in vehicles. — Various sources

March 31, 2002, Independence, Mo.

Kiri Hanna, 16, was killed when her 21-month-old daughter, who was sitting in the driver's seat of their 1993 Crown Victoria, shifted the vehicle out of park. At the time, Hanna was standing outside the vehicle and was strapping her 7-month-old son into the rear passenger seat. The keys were not in the ignition, and the car was not running, police said. — *Kansas City Star*

May 17, 2003, Colorado Springs

Adreanna Cook-Patrick, 4, was run over by a GMC Yukon in the family's driveway while she was helping her mother clean the vehicle. The victim's 2-year-old brother was in the driver's seat. The ignition switch was turned so the radio could play. The girl was standing behind the SUV when the toddler, according to police, shifted the car out of park. The mother, who was also outside the vehicle, jumped in the moving vehicle but was unable to stop it in time. — *The Gazette*

April 14, 2004, Farmington, N.H.

Ian Joseph Campbell, 21 months, was killed and his 4-year-old brother, Adam, injured after jumping from a moving Ford F-350 pickup outside their home. Both had been playing unsupervised when the older boy shifted the vehicle out of park. The truck was owned by their father, a state representative. The incident helped spur automakers to agree to equip virtually all new vehicles with brake-shift interlock by 2010. — *New Haven Register*

July 4, 2007, Bridgeport, Conn.

A woman and three children ages 2 to 6 drowned after the 1999 Plymouth minivan rolled into a pond. Michelle McIntosh, 39, had left the van parked and idling on a hill as she talked briefly with the driver of a nearby vehicle. Police believe one of the children climbed into the driver's seat and moved the shift lever out of park. The mother ran after and climbed into the moving van but was unable to stop it before it became submerged. — New Haven Register

Nov. 20, 2010, Burleson, Texas

Chassey Bates was severely injured and her 3-week-old baby, Chase, was killed by a runaway 2005 Chrysler minivan. Bates had parked the van and exited it and was talking with a neighbor. Police said a 4-year-old son left inside the van got the keys from her purse, started the vehicle and put it into gear. A liability lawsuit later revealed the van's brake-shift interlock had been disabled by a used car dealer during installation of a tracking device. — Fort Worth Star-Telegram

July 14, 2012, Gainesville, Texas

Alex Ritchey, 5, was killed after being hit by his father's Dodge pickup. The keys had been left in the ignition, and the boy got into the truck while his father was in the house. The boy turned the key and shifted the truck out of park. The truck began rolling backward; he jumped out of the open driver's door, which struck him, pushing him into the path of the left front wheel. — Gainesville Daily Register

http://www.jconline.com/article/20121201/NEWS/312010053/Turn-around-they-re-gone?nclick_check=1