

# Critical minutes: In mere seconds, a car can become dangerously hot

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*The temperature inside a car can quickly exceed 100 degrees, even on an overcast day. On a sunny day in summer, the inside temp can rise to 120 degrees within minutes. / Katie King/kking@pnj.com*

## Car safety tips from the experts

**1.** Make it a routine to open two doors before leaving the car. “Get in the habit of always checking two doors: your door and the back door,” says Dr. Rob Patterson, medical director of the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Sacred Heart Hospital.

**2.** Use a prop, such as a stuffed animal, as a reminder.

“Have a stuffed animal — ‘Buckle Bear’ — that sits in the car seat,” Patterson says. “Whenever you place your child in the car, move it to the front passenger seat, to remind you that there is always someone sitting in the back seat.”

**3.** Place something in the back seat that you will need in order to leave the car.

“Place something that will get you to look in the back seat ... a purse, a cellphone or a brief case,” Patterson says.

**4.** Always make sure your car is locked and your keys are inaccessible to young children.

“Keep the doors locked, even if it’s in your garage or your lot. ... Keep the doors and remote openers in an area where kids can’t get them,” said Amber Rollins, Director of Kidsandcars.org.

**5.** If a child is exhibiting signs of heat exhaustion or heat stroke — such as paleness, shallow breath, dizziness or unconsciousness — get the child cool as quickly as possible.

“If they’re unresponsive, call 911, but in the meantime, get them in the shade, get cool water on them, fan them. ... Cooling them down is the most important thing,” said Dr. John Lanza, director of the Escambia County Health Department.

For more information on children and car safety, visit [www.kidsandcars.org](http://www.kidsandcars.org).

Twenty minutes.

That’s all the time it can take for a car’s inside temperature to exceed 100 degrees on a summer day with the windows closed, and for a child left inside to suffer irreparable damage or even death.

“The average parent thinks that this can’t happen to them,” said Amber Rollins, director of KidsAndCars.org.

The nonprofit organization has been working to track and prevent vehicle-related deaths involving children since 1996. But recently, the tragic tales of children who have sweltered to death in scorching cars have been reported with disturbing frequency.

Since May, there have been nine reported cases of U.S. children dying in hot vehicles, with roughly half occurring within the past two weeks, according to national child safety agency kidsandcars.org. That’s double the monthly average for such incidents, according to the organization.

Three of those deaths occurred in Florida, the Florida Department of Children and Families reports. But it was the most recent case, the story of 2-year-old Hezekiah Brooks, that struck the collective nerve of the Pensacola community.

On June 2, the Escambia County toddler wandered out of his Warrington home into the 90-degree heat and inside his grandfather’s Buick. After an extensive search, his body was found on the floorboards of the back seat of the vehicle four hours later. On Thursday, a brokenhearted family held his funeral.

News of the tragedy left residents wondering how the child ended up in such a deadly predicament.

But it is a situation Dr. Rob Patterson has encountered many times in his 16 years as medical director of the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Sacred Heart Hospital.

“It really only takes a short time for a car to get hot enough to begin to cause damage,” he said. “It takes less than 20 minutes for a car to reach maximal temperatures.”

From there, the symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke can quickly set in on an unsuspecting child, said Dr. John Lanza, director of the Escambia County Health Department.

“Because of dehydration, there’s poor blood flow through the body to the heart, which leads to the body shutting down,” Lanza said. “If it’s an infant, that can happen very quickly.”

But the danger first begins with a common assumption that only the children of negligent parents are at risk, Rollins said.

“The majority of parents say, ‘These people are monsters. How can they leave their child like that?’ and they want to separate themselves,” she said. “But more times than not, it happens to caring, doting parents.”

Patterson has watched young victims and their grief-stricken parents enter the intensive care unit under a variety of circumstances, but rarely is negligence a factor, he said.

“More times than not, it’s a case of carelessness rather than lack of care,” he said. “You’ve got loving parents that placed their child in the car seat and just forgot. ... We’ve had children that are 3 or so, who have gotten themselves into cars and for whatever reason, can’t get themselves out.”

In fact, in about 54 percent of all child deaths caused by vehicular heat stroke, the child was unknowingly left in a vehicle, according to data collected by kidsandcars.org. In roughly 32 percent of cases, the children got into the vehicle on their own. Cases where a parent or caregiver knowingly left a child in a vehicle only accounted for about 11 percent.

“A lot of people think, ‘Well, a 2-year-old can’t get into the car on their own.’ Well, sure they can,” Rollins said.

Parents can prevent such tragedies from occurring by keeping their cars locked at all times — even when in garages — and keeping car keys away from children. They should also always look in the back seat before locking the car door, experts say.

And do not assume that leaving a child in a vehicle with a cracked window makes it safe, Patterson said.

“It really makes no difference in the rate of speed that the car gets hot,” he said.

Parents should also think of a car as they would a pool or body of water, experts say. If a child has wandered off, it should be one of the first places they look.

“We need to start thinking about a car as being just as dangerous as a pool,” Rollins said.

And it is not only caregivers who can do their part, Patterson said. Anyone who notices a child left unattended in a closed vehicle should step in. When every minute counts, stepping in could make the difference between life and another tragic story.

“If you’re walking by a car and you see a child in the car, don’t hesitate to call 911. ... Empowering the public to get involved is really important,” Patterson said.

<http://www.pnj.com/article/20130608/NEWS01/306080028/Critical-minutes>