

Don't leave children in unattended in cars this summer

Temperatures can rise rapidly

Jun. 18, 2013 12:42 PM | Written by Emily Miels, The Reporter Media, (920) 907-7912 or by email at emiels@fonddulac.gannett.com



Temperatures inside vehicles can rise to dangerous levels very quickly. Eleven children have already died in unattended vehicles in the U.S. this year. / The Reporter photo illustration by Patrick Flood

As temperatures continue to rise, local officials warn parents and caregivers about the risks of leaving children unattended in vehicles.

Assistant Chief Steve Klein said the Fond du Lac Police Department frequently gets calls during the summer about kids and pets left in cars.

"It is quite common for us to receive complaints throughout the summer months about pets and children being left unattended in vehicles," Klein said.

So far in 2013, 11 children have already died in the U.S. after being left alone in hot vehicles, according to research by the advocacy group KidsAndCars.org. Most were children under age 2.

Vehicles can overheat quickly

Dr. Nathan Larsen, St. Agnes Hospital emergency department medical director, said that infants and children up to 4 years old are very vulnerable to heat and should never be left alone in a vehicle.

"The temperature inside a vehicle can climb quickly to very dangerous — and sometimes deadly — temperatures in a matter of minutes," he said.

Larsen said he often sees cases of heatstroke and heat exhaustion in summer. Signs of heatstroke include headaches, nausea, fatigue, fainting, cramps and an elevated body temperature.

Be alert

Janette Fennell, founder and president of KidsAndCars.org, said it is easy to assume the deaths are due to neglectful caregivers, but that isn't necessarily true.

"Usually it goes with a change in routine," she explained.

Infants are in rear-facing car seats, unseen by drivers and tend to fall asleep in cars. Fennell said a quiet baby in the backseat can be accidentally forgotten and left in a hot vehicle when a driver is distracted by an unexpected phone call or detour, especially if the caregiver is not normally the one who drops the child off.

Most of the time, extreme cases like these can be avoided.

Fennell said if a phone call had been made when the child unexpectedly didn't show up, many of the deaths could have been prevented. Having a good communication policy with the child's daycare and caregivers is important.

Fennell also suggests putting the child's favorite toy or diaper bag in the front seat or putting a daily item such as a purse, cell phone or keys in the backseat to help remind drivers that the child is still in vehicle.

"We're cue dependent," Fennell said.

Always play it on the safe side

While many of the deaths were due to children being forgotten in a hot vehicle for extended amounts of time, Klein said it is simply wise never to leave a child in a car at all.

"The recommendation is to never leave a child unattended in a vehicle, even if it's only for a short time," he said.

If a child or pet is seen unattended in a vehicle in a parking lot, witnesses can contact the business and have the owner of the vehicle paged or call the police non-emergency line, Klein suggested. If it seems like an emergency, Klein said witnesses should not hesitate to call 911.

<http://www.fdlreporter.com/article/20130619/FON0101/306190036/Don-t-leave-children-unattended-cars-summer>