

Even the most loving parents can forget children in cars, experts say

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Angela Mulholland, CTVNews.ca Published Thursday, July 4, 2013 1:49PM EDT



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A stuffed animal sits on a sidewalk in memory of Edmonton girl who died after being left in a hot vehicle.

When tragic stories make headlines of children forgotten in sun-baked cars, the immediate reaction from many is: how could a loving parent ever forget their own child? But it's not lazy or "bad" parents who are typically responsible for these tragedies, experts say; they can happen to anyone.

Amber Rollins, the director of KidsAndCars.org says any caregiver have moments of forgetfulness.

"People think that it is monsters or terrible parents, but this is happening to the most educated, responsible people," Rollins told CTVToronto.ca earlier this week. "...The No. 1 thing that we tell people is: 'Don't ever think that this can't happen to you'."

Rollins' non-profit group is one of the only organizations that keeps track of accidents involving children inside cars. No government agency in Canada or the U.S. has studied how these incidents happen, or who is most likely to be responsible for them.

But the administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in the U.S., David L. Strickland, has said that based on everything known about these incidents, the vast majority are not due to negligence. Instead, he says most are simply tragic accidents.

"Child heatstroke in a hot car can happen to any caregiver from any walk of life, even to the most loving and conscientious parents," Strickland said recently in an NHTSA statement.



Pamela Fuscelli, the vice president of government relations at Parachute, appears on CTV News Channel on Thursday, July 4, 2013.

Pamela Fuscelli, the vice president of government relations at Parachute, a non-profit Canadian safety group, says some caregivers who have forgotten about children in their cars report they were tired when the tragedies occurred.

Others say they were not following their usual routine, and forgot, for example, that they were supposed to drop the child off at daycare or school.

"Parents or caregivers are fatigued or stressed, they are out of their normal routine – that's often what we hear -- and they forget. It's amazing but they do," she told CTV News Channel Thursday.

While it tends to be older children who lock themselves in cars when their caregivers aren't looking, Fuscelli says babies and toddlers are usually the victims in cases where they were simply forgotten.

"It's typically with younger children. They fall asleep so they're not making any noise," she says.

Washington Post journalist Gene Weingarten conducted a large Pulitzer Prize-winning [investigation in 2009](#), examining why parents forget children in cars. He learned that such incidents were relatively rare two decades ago.

That began to change in the early 1990s, he found, when well-meaning car-safety experts began recommending that child seats be moved to the back, and that infant car seats be oriented to face the rear of the vehicle.

The unintended result has been that children in the backseat are more easily forgotten than if they were in the front. Rollins from KidsandCars.org agrees that since laws about car seats came into effect, the numbers of heatstroke-related car deaths has been on the rise. The ironic aspect, she points out, is that the recommendation to move children to the back was an effort to reduce the number of children killed by airbags in the front.

“As soon as that happened, we saw these heat stroke deaths of children being forgotten in the car reach an all-time high. I mean they just blew up. It went from a couple a year, to maybe 30 or 40 a year,” Rollins said of fatal incidents in the U.S.

“It has far surpassed the number of children being killed by airbags.”

In the last few years, a number of devices have entered the market that promise to alert parents or caregivers when a child has been accidentally left inside a hot car. But an NHTSA report released last year found that the majority of these products are unreliable.

The researchers reviewed 18 such products, including pads that fit into car seats and that are meant to detect when a child is present when he shouldn't be. They found the products were not reliable because they failed to operate when a child was slumped over or otherwise out-of-position, or if a liquid was spilled on them. Kids often found ways to disable them deliberately as well. Other tests found the signals on the devices could be interfered with easily, or stopped working beyond a certain range.

What's more, the NHTSA worried the products were too complicated and might give parents a false sense of security. Other products are still being developed. But in the meantime, the NHTSA recommends parents follow other methods to ensure their children are kept safe in cars. They include:

- Making a habit of placing your purse, briefcase or bags on the floor of the back seat. That way you'll be forced to check the back before leaving a car
- Getting in the habit of always opening the back door every time you reach your destination
- Keeping a stuffed animal on the passenger seat when your child is with you to remind you they're in the back
- Agreeing with your spouse to call each other if you make a switch to your normal child drop-off routine
- Teaching your children never to play inside a car and storing your car keys out of reach. Safe Kids Worldwide says about 30 per cent of fatal incidents of heatstroke in cars happen when children climb into cars to play but can't get themselves out
- Remembering that a car can heat up to dangerous levels within just a few minutes -- even with the windows cracked open. The Canada Safety Council says the temperature in a car exposed to the sun on a 35 C day can climb to 50 C within just 20 minutes.
- Never leaving a child unattended in a car, even for a minute. Beyond the risk of overheating, it's also possible for the child can disengage the brakes or choke on something they find in the car
- Calling 911 right away if you ever see a child alone in a vehicle. If they seem hot or seem sick, get them out as quickly as possible

With report from CTVNews.ca's Jonathan Zettel

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