

Children at risk in hot vehicles

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Jim Hannon/TimesDaily photo illustration, Children at risk in hot vehicles A laser gauge records the temperature that can rise in a parked vehicle on a hot day, putting children and pets at risk.

Janette Fennell sometimes cringes when her phone rings during the summer.

Fennell, founder of KidsAndCars.org, fears the voice on the other end will deliver the news that another child has died after being left in a hot vehicle.

“Unfortunately, we’re now up to 20 (nationwide) this year,” said Fennell, whose nonprofit organization focuses on preventing injuries and deaths to children in and around vehicles. “We’re a little higher than we had hoped and prayed for.”

There have been no such cases in northwest Alabama this year.

Fennell said such incidents happen a lot during the summer, and can occur even on mild days.

The temperature in a vehicle can rise above 110 degrees when it’s in the 60s outside, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

People often are surprised by that fact. Fennell said they also often are taken aback when she tells them there is no demographic to describe the typical person who leaves a child in a hot vehicle.

“If you interview people on the street and ask who this happens to, they’ll say drug addicts and people who have child-protective services at their doorsteps all the time,” she said. “In about 10 percent of the cases, there is involvement of drugs and alcohol and child-protective services. That means 90 percent of the time, it’s good parents, pillars of our community.

“The biggest mistake anyone can ever make is to think it couldn’t happen to them. People want to vilify people who do this, but what they really need to understand is this can and does happen to anyone. There is no pattern to it whatsoever. If anything, it probably skews a little bit to some of the best parents you’d ever want to meet.”

She said the tragic stories typically involve one of two scenarios.

“One is if someone runs in somewhere quickly and thinks they’ll take care of something in a minute or two,” Fennell said. “I don’t know how people think they can predict that. They should never, ever, do that, because you don’t know what’s going to happen and are putting the child at risk.”

Vehicles can reach internal temperatures of 131-172 degrees when the temperature outside is 80-100 degrees, according to the traffic safety administration.

The temperature rises an average of 19 degrees within the first 10 minutes in an enclosed vehicle, according to the administration.

Fennell said leaving the motor running keeps a vehicle cool but isn’t a good idea because it poses the threat of someone stealing the vehicle before realizing a child is in it.

The second scenario involves someone whose normal routine is altered, and they forget there is a child in the car, particularly if it’s an infant who is sleeping.

“The time when you’re most vulnerable is when there’s been a change in routine,” Fennell said. “It’s not a lack of love for your children, it’s that you have a lack of memory.”

Fennell suggests using a “buddy system” with someone who has a young child. That allows you to drop off your child with your “buddy” while running errands. In exchange, the buddy would drop his or her child off with you when the he or she has to run an errand.

She said a product called ialert, which is built into a child’s car seat, is gaining attention.

Among the product’s features is a thermostat that tells the temperature of the back seat where the car seat is located.

The ialert also sends a text if the child is in the car seat and the car is not moving for a period of time.

Children aren’t the only ones whose lives are endangered in a hot vehicle. Pets also are vulnerable.

Colbert County Animal Control Supervisor Richie Michael said they take it seriously when an animal is left in a hot vehicle.

“We investigate those like any animal cruelty case,” Michael said. “If the engine is off and windows are up, we’re going to make contact with the owner to correct that problem. We’ll talk to them and educate them.

“There have been cases when we’ve had to take action and get the animal out of there. In those cases, we pursue animal cruelty charges. We’ve used Slim Jims to unlock the door, and if I had to, I’d bust open the window to rescue the animal.”

Michael said animal cruelty officers give the vehicle's tag number to police. If the vehicle is at a store, officers have the person paged.

"We get the person out to the car and talk to them to correct the problem," he said.

As with parents, pet owners often don't realize the extent of the hazard.

"They'll say, 'I just ran in to grab a gallon of milk, but stayed in longer than anticipated,' " Michael said. "Most of the time, they don't stop to think about it. They don't mean to harm the animal."

Matt Connolly, a veterinarian with Connolly Animal Clinic in Florence, said forgetfulness, not neglect, frequently leads to an animal being trapped in a hot vehicle.

Connolly recalls a case involving an owner who put his dogs in a car and forgot they were there. The man went to work and hadn't been there long when he remembered the animals were in the car.

"He went out to the car and they were dead," he said.

Owners often think they'll only be a few minutes in a store, but that's dangerous.

Connolly said dogs even have trouble outdoors when temperatures are in the 90s, especially in humid conditions that Alabama summers typically bring. He said a dog's normal body temperature is 101 degrees, so it's hot-natured already.

"Realistically, how many times do you stop at a convenience store and you're only there a few minutes," he said. "If you go anywhere where you can't take a pet inside with you, just don't take it with you. If you can't sit in there like that, dogs obviously can't. It gets to be like an oven really quickly."

Helpful hints

Some hints from KidsAndCars.org to avoid accidentally leaving a child in a vehicle:

- Put something in the backseat such as an employee badge or cellphone so you have to open the back door to get it when leaving the vehicle.
- Have a stuffed animal in the car seat when it is unoccupied. Before putting your child in the seat, always put the stuffed animal in the front passenger seat. That will remind you when you see it.
- Ask your baby sitter or childcare provider to call you within 10 minutes if your child hasn't arrived on time.

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