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Safety Groups Encouraged By Auto Industry-Government agreement to help end danger of runaway vehicles

But Consumers Union, KIDS AND CARS say mandatory standard on "Brake shift Interlock" device is still needed

Consumers Union and KIDS AND CARS are pleased to learn about the voluntary agreement between the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the auto industry to address cars rolling away when they are inadvertently put into gear by children. But the safety groups said they still believe that a federal standard should be enacted to ensure that all automakers incorporate the safety device in all vehicles.

"We appreciate the auto industry's acknowledgement that preventing small children from putting cars in gear should be a top priority. Since we've been collecting data, over 100 children have been killed and thousands injured because a vehicle was inadvertently put into gear by a child," said Janette Fennell, president of the nonprofit safety organization, KIDS AND CARS. Children will not be able to inadvertently knock vehicles into gear if a brake shift interlock system is standard equipment on all vehicles.

A voluntary agreement was announced last week between NHTSA, the Alliance of Automotive Manufacturers and the Association of International Automobile Manufacturers to put this technology, known as "brake shift interlock," which prevents rollaway of parked vehicles by children or others who might put the car into gear, into all vehicles by 2010.

"The industry seems to be saying that this technology can and should be used to save children's lives—and that's a very positive step," said Sally Greenberg, Senior Product Safety Counsel. "We're pleased to see them not blaming parents and instead taking concrete steps to address the hazard. But we are concerned that voluntary agreements can be broken or ignored. A mandatory rule should be put in place to ensure that all automakers incorporate the device into their vehicles."

Brake shift interlocks require that the brake pedal be depressed before a car can be put into gear. Because small children cannot reach the brake pedal, they are unlikely to be able to shift the car into gear.

At least 80% of vehicles currently incorporate this critical safety technology and some automakers say 95% of their cars have it.

"The auto industry should have, but for reasons unknown has not, made this technology standard equipment in all vehicles. Nor has the federal auto safety agency, NHTSA, required them to do so." Fennell pointed out. "This problem has been around since the 1950's and many people falsely believe that all vehicles already have this important safety feature. It's not until a child has been injured or killed do families find out that certain vehicles do not have a brake shift interlock. We need to ensure that every vehicle is equipped with this safety feature," she added.

Consumers Union and KIDS AND CARS said that a binding federal standard would guarantee compliance by all manufacturers.

"We need a standard that makes universal compliance mandatory. If a new manufacturer comes into the market, it might not add the feature because it was not part of the original agreement. Moreover, in the past, the auto industry has backed away from certain voluntary agreements. We can't take that risk," Greenberg said.

As a result, KIDS AND CARS and Consumers Union are supporting legislation that will ensure that this safety feature will be required in all vehicles. S. 1948, the Cameron Gulbransen Kids and Cars Safety Act, sponsored by Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator John Sununu, will do just that; direct NHTSA to set standards for brake shift interlock that will work in all key positions and be required on all vehicles.