

Sleeping Baby Trapped in a Hot Car

Would You Come to the Rescue or Keep on Walking?

By NELLI BLACK Feb. 2, 2009

Imagine walking down a busy street and suddenly hearing a cry coming from a parked car. When you look closer, you spot a baby in the backseat and notice that all the windows are closed. It's a hot summer day and the parents are nowhere to be found. Passersby must decide what to do after seeing a baby trapped in a hot car. What do you do?

Tragically, every year almost 40 children die from hyperthermia after being left alone in a hot car. But many more kids are saved when strangers come to their rescue. ABC's "What Would You Do?" wanted to see what ordinary people would do if they came upon a baby left alone in the backseat on a hot summer day. For our ABC News experiment we parked a car on a busy suburban street for two days. Inside, we left a lifelike doll called a "reborn," made to look like a newborn infant. The doll's battery-operated breathing mechanism made it all the more convincing. We hired an actress to play the baby's mother and, with the help of a dozen surveillance cameras, watched the action from a nearby building. Janette Fennell, president of Kids and Cars, a group that promotes car safety for children, watched as the footage unfolded. What we learned both surprised and alarmed us.

10 Minutes Is All It Takes

Initially we left the baby in the car with the windows rolled up. To someone passing by, it looked as if the child were sleeping. We sat and waited for more than half an hour, but nobody seemed to notice the baby in the backseat. According to Fennell, almost 50 percent of kids who are left in cars by accident are usually forgotten by their caretakers while asleep. The only hope for these kids is if a stranger notices them inside. But during the first part of our experiment, nobody seemed to look inside our car, and the baby went unnoticed.

We decided it was time for our baby to attract some attention. We placed a small speaker in the front seat of the car, propped open the sunroof and played the sound of a newborn wailing as people passed by. We were surprised to see that many were still oblivious. People seemed too busy to notice, many listening to their iPods or using their cell phones. Meanwhile, our car was getting hotter and hotter. Before the experiment, we installed a thermometer to measure the temperature inside our vehicle. Although the temperature outside didn't rise much above 80 degrees, our car heated up to almost 120 degrees.

"It doesn't have to be hot outside for a child to die in a car," said Jan Null, professor of Meteorology at San Francisco State University. "Last year a child died in a car when it was 66 degrees outside."

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A bystander finds what appears to be a sleeping baby inside a hot car, not knowing that she is part of a "What Would You Do?" social experiment. The baby inside the car is actually a life-like doll. (ABC News)

Heat in a Car

According to Null, who has studied the impact of car temperatures on children, a car acts like a greenhouse, trapping the heat inside very quickly. He is concerned that many people believe cracking a window makes a difference. In reality, he said, it will only cool a car by a few degrees.

"An infant can die in a car in as little as 10 minutes," he said. "Their bodies heat up three times as fast as an adult's body temperature. So in a situation where an adult would be fine, but uncomfortable, a baby would not."

Assumptions and Hesitation

As we kept watching, we noticed that many people heard the sound of our baby crying and still kept walking. We asked Joanne Bowman, a mother herself, why she didn't stop.

You just assume that someone is in the car with the child," she told us. "It is really something you would imagine not happening. You don't imagine that there's a child left by itself."

When teenager Mandy Strenz walked passed the baby, she was clearly disturbed. But she walked on. She told us that she didn't want to touch somebody else's car, and that she wasn't quite sure what to do. She said she was planning to call her mother for advice. Fennell said people are afraid to break the car window because they may be liable, but if they see that a baby is in trouble, they may need to do just that.

"The first thing I would do is look around and see if there's any parents, and then I would call 911," she told us. "But if you are looking and the child looks like they are in imminent danger, I would break the window that's farthest away from the baby. It's a piece of metal versus a baby's life."

Skepticism and Anger Over Baby Left Behind

As our experiment continued, we came across one man who seemed to know exactly what to do. As soon as Joe Alferi noticed the crying baby, he tried to open the car's doors. When that didn't work he called 911, without hesitation. But the police were not coming because they were in on our experiment. When we told Joe what we were up to, we were surprised to find out that he was a police officer, well aware of the dangers of leaving a child alone in a hot car. But you don't have to be a police officer to do the right thing. Vicky Lefkowitz did a double-take when she saw the baby and she called 911 right away. We wanted to see what Lefkowitz would do when the mother returned, and so we sent our actress to get something out of the car.

"Do you always leave your baby sleeping in the car?" Lefkowitz asked politely. "I'm a mother, and I would never do that in a million years."

As she walked away she was clearly shaken and in tears.

"I have a baby and I would never do that," Lefkowitz told ABC News correspondent John Quinones. "How could I not get involved?"

As the day went on, more and more people came to the baby's rescue. Similar to Lefkowitz, most were polite to the baby's "mother." But Vinnie Torres handled the situation differently.

"You should be shot," he yelled at the mother when she returned to the car. Torres later told us that he works with young children and he was outraged by the mother's actions. Throughout our experiment, most people left the scene when the mother returned to her car. But when Amy Edelman got involved, she made sure the mother knew how she felt.

"That's totally irresponsible," she told the mother. "You shouldn't have that baby."

She and another passerby called the police, and were surprised when ABC's cameras arrived instead. Edelman told ABC News that it's just not part of her makeup to walk away, and that she was about to "take the baby home with her."

After two days of filming we learned that while many people were simply too busy or distracted to notice a sleeping baby, many others simply didn't know what to do once they spotted our child. Many of those who did act said that they had seen news reports and knew about the dangers of leaving children in locked cars. Those who came to the rescue and called the police did what one should do in the situation, said Fennell. She hopes that our experiment will "empower people to understand, that when you see a child in distress you don't walk the other way. You get involved and you do whatever it takes to make sure that the child is safe."

<http://abcnews.go.com/WhatWouldYouDo/Story?id=6772999&page=3>