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How to Remind a Parent of the Baby in the Car?

By PAUL STENQUIST Published: May 27, 2010

INFANTS or young children left inside a vehicle can die of hyperthermia in a few hours, even when the temperature outside is not especially hot. It is a tragedy that kills about 30 children a year, according to the National Safety Council.



Left: NASA Langley Research Center

REMINDER Edward Modlin, Terry Mack and William Edwards, all NASA employees, developed a keychain alarm that sounds if a child is left in a car.

Right: NASA Langley Research Center

A child presence sensor developed by NASA researchers alerts the driver when a child is left behind in a car.



Making the deaths all the more tragic, perhaps, is that many are a result of forgetfulness rather than neglect, occurring when distracted but otherwise responsible parents or caretakers inadvertently leave a child in the car.

Newspaper articles and campaigns by safety advocates had brought some attention to the problem, but its visibility grew when a March 2009 article by Gene Weingarten in The Washington Post Magazine, "Fatal Distraction," asked whether the mistake of forgetting a child in the back seat of a car was also a crime. The article won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

Is increased awareness enough to prevent these tragedies, which are more likely now that children ride in back seats to avoid injuries that could result from an air bag deployment? Or would a technical solution from automakers be a better approach?

Janette Fennell is the founder and president of KidsAndCars.org, a safety advocacy group based in Leawood, Kan., that focuses on issues involving children and automobiles. In a telephone interview, Ms. Fennell made her view clear, saying she believed that carmakers must develop reminder devices to warn drivers if a child is left behind.

Kids and Cars campaigned for such a requirement to be written into the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act of 2008. But it was not among the important safety measures mandated by the legislation, which included automatic-reversing power windows, standards for rearward visibility and brake pedal-gear shift interlocks.

“When our efforts to get child-left-behind legislation in that bill were unsuccessful, we took a step back and asked how can we take care of both the hyperthermia issue and other problems,” Ms. Fennell said.

As a result, Kids and Cars is proposing that a requirement for safety belt latching reminders for all seating positions be attached to the next Transportation Department reauthorization bill. The proposed regulation would also mandate a child-left-behind warning, which could share electronics with the belt reminder.

Even as Kids and Cars pushes for action, a solution from the auto industry seems some way off. Asked about warning devices over the last two months, many automakers said they had conducted research, but none provided specifics. A few addressed the issue in general terms.

For example, an Audi spokesman, Bradley Stertz, said that the Volkswagen Group was working on systems that could be adapted to child detection. Among these are interior cameras, heat sensors and motion detectors that are intended for other uses, but could possibly play a role in a detection device.

“The short answer is, the concept is on the table with a range of other occupant-detection systems,” Mr. Stertz said. “But there’s no firm timetable on when it will move closer to market.”

Volvo investigated a solution for the problem of left-behind children almost a decade ago.

A spokesman, Dan Johnston, said in a telephone interview that Volvo developed a heartbeat-sensing device in 2001. While the technology was intended to detect a child or pet left behind, it proved unfeasible. It was later modified to detect a hidden intruder when the driver activated the system.

“Liability problems are part of the issue,” Mr. Johnston said, referring to the potential for lawsuits if a child-detection system failed to alert a driver.

Ford, which owned Volvo when the technology was in development, offered only a brief comment on the issue. A spokesman, Wesley Sherwood III, said in an e-mail message that Ford had not announced plans to market automobiles with child-occupant warning devices.

Though automakers were not eager to discuss technical solutions, a rocket scientist was. William Edwards, a senior engineer at NASA’s Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va., led an effort to develop a child-left-behind warning device after a child died of hyperthermia in the center’s parking lot.

The NASA device is simple. When a child is placed in the car seat, a sensor under the cushion, working through a module mounted on the side of the seat, establishes communication with an

alarm on the driver's key ring. If the driver walks away from the car while the child is still in the seat, the alarm sounds — and can be turned off only by removing the child.

The NASA device was designed to be added to existing cars, and the research center is looking for a commercial partner to further develop and market a product based on the technology.

Mr. Edwards said he believed an automaker could offer a similar device as a factory-installed feature.

“There's no reason that couldn't happen if a manufacturer wanted to do it,” he said.

Ken Waller agrees. Mr. Waller was a Ford design analysis engineer and an expert witness in safety liability cases. He is now retired.

“A warning device is technically feasible,” he said. “But what I see here is low incidence. Every case is tragic, but the rate of occurrence is minimal. Product planners would probably say we can't penalize every back-seat car in regard to cost. It would take regulation before a car company would do it.”



FOUNDER Janette Fennell, left, of Kids and Cars, with Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

Some automakers are coordinating their efforts on the forgotten-child matter through an industry trade group, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, an association that includes BMW, Chrysler, Ford, General Motors, Jaguar, Land Rover, Mazda, Mercedes-Benz, Mitsubishi, Porsche, Toyota and Volkswagen. An Alliance spokesman, Wade Newton, said, “Right now we're working to raise awareness of the issue.”

Without addressing specific efforts to develop warning systems, Mr. Newton said he believed that automakers across the board were always looking at safety but had not found a way to design out the role of the caregiver.

On its Web site, the Alliance says it has “joined Safe Kids USA and more than 40 other interested organizations in efforts to increase awareness and urge parents and caregivers to never leave a child alone in a vehicle.”

Safe Kids USA is a program of the Children's National Medical Center, a pediatric hospital in Washington. A spokeswoman, Lorrie Walker, said in a telephone interview that among many child-safety causes that the organization promoted was “Safe Kids Buckle Up,” a multifaceted

safety program financed by General Motors that included efforts intended to prevent injuries and deaths that could result from children being left alone in vehicles.

The organization has suggestions for caregivers. One is that drivers leave something they need next to the child — a purse or cellphone, for example. The assumption is that if the item is remembered, the child will be as well.

On the question of whether Safe Kids is pressing automakers for a warning system or supporting legislation that would require one, the group's stance is less clear-cut.

"It's a very ticklish subject," Ms. Walker said. "We're all for advancing technology. For right now, people need to have tools so they don't forget their child. The whole idea of a warning light or warning bell may or may not work."

She added: "People don't always pay attention to technology. Are we going to rely 100 percent on technology, or are we going to help the driver remember that there's a child in the back seat?"

"We'll support technology when it becomes available," Ms. Walker said. "But we'll keep hitting this hard until that happens. General Motors has been instrumental in making sure we have the funds to do that."

When asked if the sponsorship from G.M. colored the organization's positions, the executive director of Safe Kids, Alan Korn, said that G.M.'s support had made it possible for the organization to provide child-safety services. As an example, he cited the organization's seminars on child-safety seats and the free seats it provided to low-income parents.

Among the supporters of the Safe Kids program is Ms. Fennell of Kids and Cars.

"They have coalitions all around the country, and I work with them on a lot of different issues," she said. "I've spoken at their conferences. They're fabulous people."

But, she said, remember that Safe Kids' funding for automotive safety programs comes from G.M.

"Safe Kids didn't support the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act of 2008," Ms. Fennell said. "In fact, they said, 'We're not sure if technology works.'"

In support of this, Ms. Fennell provided a document she said Safe Kids sent to safety advocates. It was in response to a consumer group's request that Safe Kids support a petition urging Congress to pass the Cameron Gulbransen act.

"It is our understanding that many technologies are expensive and could add significant expense to a new car," the document said. "Safe Kids Worldwide is not inherently against new technology, but we want to know the facts before making any decision about proposed legislation."

The statement went on to clarify the organization's approach to one provision of the act.

"In the interim, Safe Kids supports a 'low' technology approach to deal with the issue of children being backed over by cars."

Mr. Korn confirmed that this excerpt accurately stated the organization's view and that the Safe Kids' position regarding a child-left behind warning device was essentially the same.

A G.M. spokesman, Bill Grotz, said that the Safe Kids forgotten-child awareness program had been a main focus of the automaker.

Mr. Grotz said that while G.M. had made efforts on the technology front, it was not ready to release details.

In a follow-up e-mail message, Mr. Grotz said, "We have evaluated a variety of technologies that detect the presence of children left unattended in vehicles and alert people near the vehicles of the situation. However, the technologies we looked at were not reliable enough in the wide range of environmental circumstances that a vehicle is subject to in its lifetime. We've concluded that the most effective way to deal with this issue is to build awareness among parents, caregivers and passers-by."

Ms. Fennell said she believed that while caretaker awareness was important, technical solutions could not be dismissed. She said a child-left-behind warning system was critically needed and that her organization would continue to fight for it.

"If we leave the headlights on or keys in the ignition, we get a buzz," she said. "Somehow we have decided that it's more important not to have a dead car battery than a dead baby."

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