



Do You Know the Dangers of Leaving Children in Hot Cars?

Q. I recently heard about an old grandmother who was babysitting her four month old great grandchild and forgot the infant was in the car and the infant died from heat exposure. Can you warn parents about the dangers of leaving children in hot cars this summer?

A. It is such a sad scenario to hear that parents, grandparents and even babysitters, have left a child or two in the car because they only planned to be in the store or post office for a few minutes. Many return to find the child/children very sick or dead. In the story you have shared, it was just a sad mistake. Being older and out of her usual routine, made it easy to forget the infant was there. This is especially true in these kinds of cases because many babies sleep while riding in a car so there would be no noise to remind the adult of the child's presence.

One common thread in these types of situations is having the child in the car is not the person's usual routine. Parents need to create a system that decreases the chance of the other parent forgetting the child. For example, the parent not taking the child that day should call and follow up with the other parent as a reminder. It takes a few seconds and guarantees the child is not forgotten.

Although experts often focus on more common [safety](#) measures, like using [car seats](#) correctly and basic [childproofing](#)

, there are many less well known 'hidden dangers' that may put your kids at risk. Your family car is one of these 'hidden dangers,' and it is not just because of car accidents. In addition to the risk of getting hit or run over by a car, being left or getting trapped in a hot car can be just as deadly a danger. In fact, over

230

children have died after being left in a hot car

(

sometimes on relatively mild days with

only

70 degree

temperatures

)

since

1998.

According to the

www.About.com

website, situations in which kids get hurt in hot cars include:

- a. infants and [toddlers](#) are simply forgotten in their car seat

- b. toddlers or [preschoolers](#) sneak into the car to play and can't get out

- c. kids get trapped in the trunk

What's So Dangerous About It?

In addition to the risk of being abducted if they are left alone in a car, on a typical [summer](#) day, the temperature inside a car (even with the windows rolled down a little) can quickly rise above

120 to 140 degrees

. Even on a relatively mild day, the temperature inside a car can get above

100 degrees

. At those temperatures, kids are at great risk for

[heat stroke](#)

, which can lead to a high fever,

[dehydration](#)

, seizures, stroke and death. Your child could get caught in a closing power window. If a car thief decides to steal your car while you are gone, he may leave your child outside and your child could start wandering around looking for you, making it hard for them to be located. Another danger of leaving your child alone in a car is that they can get out of their car seat and start playing with the steering wheel, gas pedal and brake pedal, or the gear shifter, resulting in the car moving without a driver behind the wheel. If the car starts moving while your child is alone in the car, the car could be hit by another car or it could hit something like a tree or a pole. The car could also move onto the road creating a very dangerous situation for other cars on the road. Now the child's life and other innocent drivers' lives are in danger.

www.associatedcontent.com

Don't Think This Could Ever Happen To You?

If you don't think that it can happen to you, consider these descriptions from the death certificates of children from 1998 that were published by the **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**:

- a 9 month old died after being 'left strapped in child safety seat in a sweltering minivan for two hours - misunderstanding between child's parents resulted in the child being left alone in the van; one parent believed infant was at home with the other'
- a 6 month old 'baby died when accidentally left in hot car for 3 hrs, died when outside 90-degree temperatures rose to 130 degrees inside closed car, parents thought the other had carried the baby from the car to crib'
- a 34 month old 'toddler who recently learned how to open a car door apparently climbed inside family station wagon while parent and sibling were in house'
- a 23 month old died when a 'relative babysitting child, put child in car for trip to store, went back in house having forgotten something, was distracted by something on television, sat on couch to watch, fell asleep, woke up two hours later'
- a 2 year old died after a 'parent left child in car after returning home from errand - was left for more than an hour'
- a 2 year old 'child apparently slipped away from parents and siblings, fell asleep atop blanket in unlocked car in driveway of home, oldest sibling found child 40 minutes later'

Remember, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 'a locked car sitting in the summer sun quickly turns into an oven,' and 'temperatures can climb from 78 degrees to 100 degrees in just three minutes, to 125 degrees in 6-8 minutes.' Visit

www.nhtsa.gov

for more information.

Here Are Some Safety Tips!

1. Don't leave them in a car, which can quickly heat up, especially on a hot, sunny day
2. Always lock your car and secure the keys so that your kids can't get to them
3. Warn your kids about playing in the car by themselves without adult supervision
4. Install a trunk release mechanism, so that they can't get trapped in the trunk
5. Get your kids out of the car first, and then worry about getting the groceries, etc., out of the car when you get home
6. Make sure that child car providers and day care workers have a plan to make sure that kids aren't left in the day care providers car or van
7. If you are afraid that you might leave your sleeping infant or toddler in their car seat when you get out of the car, place a reminder on the dashboard.
8. Also be on alert for cars that might have an unattended child left inside. If you see a child alone in a car, be sure to call 911 and help make sure the child gets out as soon as possible.
9. When a [child is missing](#), in addition to checking the backyard pool and any other bodies of water, check inside the car and trunk of any nearby vehicles.
10. Check the temperature of child safety seats and seat belts before buckling kids up. The metal can become hot enough to cause burns.
11. Ensure that children drink plenty of fluids and are always hydrated.
12. If you fear you may forget that you have a baby or toddler in the car, set an alarm on your phone or PDA to remind you.
13. If driving your children is not the normal routine of your spouse, plan a follow up call to each other to make sure they are not forgotten by mistake.
14. Make follow up calls to others who don't normally drive your children including grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends.

Can Criminal Charges Be Brought Against Parents for Leaving Children in Cars Alone?

Yes, there can be penalties for leaving children unattended in parked cars.

Although there is no uniform law, local laws are currently being enacted to allow police to ticket

anyone who leaves an underage child in a car without the supervision of someone who is of the required age. The fee can range from \$100-\$300, along with costly court fees. If anything happens to the child, more serious consequences can occur, such as criminal charges which can include:

- Jail sentence
- Probation
- Community service

Parents can be charged with child neglect, child endangerment, which is a grave charge that can lead to jail time, and possibly a [Child Protective Services](#) investigation that may result in the placement of their children in foster care. Because of the serious repercussions that can occur from leaving a child in an unattended car, it is wise to seek counsel from a criminal lawyer should you be charged with this crime. Parents are advised to never leave their children in unattended cars in the summer or in the winter and not even for a few minutes. Take your child with you wherever you go. If you don't want to carry your child from store to store then wait till your spouse is home to do your shopping or get a babysitter. The possible results are not worth risking it. Visit [www.About.com](#),

[m](#)
www.4rkidssake.org/hotcars.htm
www.legalmatch.com
for more information.

Lisa-Anne Ray-Byers is a licensed and certified speech-language pathologist who has worked in education for over two decades. She holds graduate degrees in speech-language pathology and multicultural education. She also holds certification in educational administration. She is the author of the books,

They Say I Have ADHD, I Say Life Sucks!
Thoughts From Nicholas, They SSSay I'm a StStStutterer, But I SSSay Nothing! Meet Kelly
With ADHD! and co-author of ***365 Ways to Succeed***
She is the

Education Editor of the
Community Journal

newspaper in Baldwin, NY and a member of the National Education Writers Association. You may contact her at

speechlr@yaho.com
or by visiting her website at
www.AskLisaAnne.com