

FEATURES

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Don't Leave Your Child Alone in the Car to Die

As a result of being left alone in the car, more than 300 children have died since the late 1990s due to heat-related illnesses. Of these, 49 percent of the children were left alone, and died, because their parents: 1) didn't want to disturb a sleeping child; 2) wanted to sleep, work, drink or use drugs or gamble; or 3) didn't want to have to deal with the child's behavior in the store. A large percentage died because the parents were rushed, changed their daily routine and forgot that they had a child in the car. And lastly, almost one-third of the deaths (boys between 2-3 years of age) occurred when the children got into the cars themselves and no one knew they were there. Most of the children, 33 percent, are less than 1 year old and the average age is approximately 24 months.

Sadly, heat is much more dangerous for children than it is for adults. A child's small size makes it hard for the child to shed heat. When left in a hot vehicle, a young child's core body temperature may increase 3-5 times faster than that of an adult. This can cause permanent injury or even death. Heat (especially humid heat) rapidly overwhelms the body's ability to regulate temperature, the body goes into shock and blood supply to vital organs fails.

If you think you can safely leave a child in a car for a "quick" errand, think again. For example: Let's say you need to get some milk for dinner and you're very rushed. You're sure you can run into the store and be out in five minutes. Unfortunately, the product was not easily found, the line is longer than you thought, and the check-out person is slow. Five minutes turns into a longer period of time. If the child dies and a parent is prosecuted, court reports indicate the following: mothers are 26 percent more likely than fathers to do time for their conviction; 50 percent of the women are jailed while only 47 percent of the men are jailed; fathers generally get a three-year sentence while women get a five-year sentence; and baby-sitters are more likely than parents to be charged and convicted.

How much time does it take to produce a lethal consequence? In as little as 10 minutes you can come back to a car that has a lifeless child inside. In fact, consider this time table: In 10 minutes, the car temperature rises 19 degrees; 20 minutes = 29 degrees; 30 minutes = 34 degrees; 60 minutes = 43 degrees; 1-2 hours = 45-50 degrees.

However, it doesn't even take 10 minutes to create a problem if the outdoor temperature is rising. On a mild day at 73 degrees outside, a car can heat up to 100 degrees in 10 minutes, and to 120 in just 30 minutes. But as the temperature rises to 90 degrees outside, the interior of a vehicle can heat up to 160 degrees in just a few minutes. Experts state the most rapid temperature increase to potentially lethal levels inside a vehicle occurs during the first 15 minutes of being left in the sun.

Finally, if you think that cracking the window to let some “heat escape and air get inside” will protect your child, think about this: When the outside temperature is 93 degrees with a window down one inch, the temperature inside a car can reach 125 degrees in just 20 minutes and approximately 140 degrees in 40 minutes.

Safety recommendations:

1. NEVER leave a child unattended in a vehicle, even for one minute. Don't consider it even if you are rushed, need one item, and the child is a monster to handle in the store. The consequences to the child, and yourself, aren't worth it.
2. The Web site <http://www.KidsAndCars.org> suggests putting a teddy bear in the car. When you leave home with the child in the car seat, put the teddy bear in the front seat next to you. Each time you remove the child, put the teddy bear in the child's car seat. When you return the child to the car, put the bear back in the front seat again. So, if the bear is in the front seat, the child must be in the car seat.
3. Put your purse on the back floor of the car near the child's car seat. This means that you can't go in the store without getting your purse, so you have to look in the back seat to get it.
4. Always lock your car and ensure children do not have access to keys or remote entry devices. If a child is missing, check the car first, including the trunk. Teach your children that vehicles are never to be used as a play area.
5. If you see a child in a locked car, especially if they appear to be “asleep”, call 911 immediately. Don't wait for the adult to return or for a locksmith. By the time they get there, it may be too late.