

## **The Health Corner: Leaving kids in cars: dangerous, unnecessary--and against the law**

Written by Submitted by Robin Kent, RN, PA-C, Primary Care Associates of Leonard  
Thursday, 28 April 2011 09:21 - Last Updated Thursday, 21 July 2011 09:31

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April 21, 2011 - Did you know a child's body heats up three to five times faster than yours when exposed to the same temperature? It's a major reason why seven Texas kids died in five months in 2010 after being locked in overheated cars--almost a third of the 23 deaths nationwide.

Johnny Humphreys, manager of the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Safe Riders program, says our blazing summer heat should be a rock-solid argument against leaving children alone in a car. But there are plenty more.

"For one thing, it's against state law to leave a child unattended in a locked car for more than five minutes, even with a window partially open," Humphreys said. "Our position is, simply, don't do it under any circumstances. It's just too great a risk."

Another reason not to lock children in cars is that it's impossible to judge heat danger based on a thermometer reading. "You've heard of the greenhouse effect? Well, the same thing can happen inside a locked car," Humphreys explained. "Heat comes in easily through the windows, then gets contained there. Temperatures can rise incredibly fast."

According to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services' See and Save child safety program, it takes only ten minutes for the temperature to reach 100 in a locked car on a mild 75-degree day.

Dr. Lauri Kalanges, the medical director of DSHS' Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Section, said this can be especially deadly for children. Their bodies get hot faster than an adult's because they're less efficient at dissipating heat through sweat, blood flow to the skin and vascular dilation.

Parental risk taking isn't the only factor in children's hyperthermia (overheating) deaths, Humphreys noted. Since 1998, more than half of the 467 American kids who died from heat-related causes in cars were left there by adult caregivers who just plain forgot about them. Many others gained entry to an unlocked vehicle and became trapped inside.

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Most of these tragic incidents could be prevented by a few simple precautions recommended by Safe Riders:

Teach kids never to play in empty cars.

Keep car doors locked at all times and store keys out of children's reach.

Lock doors and trunks immediately after everyone has exited the vehicle.

If you're carrying a child in your back seat, put an important personal item such as your cell phone, briefcase or purse in front of him or her. This will ensure that you see the child before you leave the car.

Set alarms on your cell phone and office computer to be sure you dropped your child off at day care. (Many accidental deaths happen when parents forget to drop a child off and instead go straight to work, leaving the child in their car.) To double cover yourself, ask daycare employees to call you at work if you're even a few minutes later than usual.

If a child turns up missing, make empty cars in the vicinity -- including trunks -- the first places you search.

Finally, although parents and other adult caregivers are the best defense against accidental hyperthermia, Humphreys said an alert public can add even more protection.

"If you're walking through a parking lot and see a child alone in a car, call 9-1-1 right away, even if they don't appear to be suffering from the heat. EMS crews have the training to determine a child's status. Don't hesitate, just make the call. This is a case where we all can be part of the solution."

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