



Feature Column

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Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

Cars in the Summertime Heat Can Be Deadly For Children

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Most of us know the dangers of leaving a child unattended in a car in the harsh Arkansas summer, but some parents may mistakenly think that they can safely leave a child in a vehicle for a “quick” errand. Unfortunately, a delay of just a few minutes can lead to tragedy. Despite annual warnings to parents and caregivers that leaving kids unattended in hot cars can have tragic consequences, at least 30 more children died nationwide last year of over-heating. Remember, when the outside temperature is 93 degrees Fahrenheit, even with a window cracked, the temperature inside a car can reach 125 degrees Fahrenheit in just 20 minutes and almost 140 degrees in 40 minutes. In these extreme conditions, children can die or suffer permanent disability quickly -- in a matter of minutes.

According to a recent survey by the National SAFE KIDS Campaign and General Motors, nine percent of parents report that young children can be left in a car unattended. Among parents between the ages of 18 and 24, twice as many contend that it is okay to leave a child alone in a vehicle.

The Arkansas SAFE KIDS Coalition and the National SAFE KIDS Campaign are issuing an urgent warning to parents and caregivers to take extra precautions with children in and around vehicles during the summer months.

"Many of these deaths are the tragic result of parents who don't know the lethal conditions of a

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closed car in hot weather," said Virginia Lancaster, coordinator of the Arkansas SAFE KIDS Coalition. "All adults need to understand that any unlocked car can become a deadly playground for small children, who may know how to enter but, once inside, are unable to escape."

Extreme heat rapidly overwhelms the body's ability to regulate temperature. In a closed environment, the body can go into shock and circulation to vital organs will begin to fail. Infants and small children are particularly vulnerable due to their body configuration.

The SAFE KIDS survey also found that only 58 percent of parents always lock their cars at home and one out of five parents rarely or never does so. Unlocked cars pose serious risks to children who are naturally curious and often lack fear. Once they crawl in, they don't know how to get out.

You can fight heat-related injuries in cars this summer by staying alert and following these child safety tips:

- Keep cars locked at all times, even in the garage or driveway.
- Teach children not to play in or around cars.
- Never leave your child in an unattended car, even with the windows down.
- If your child gets locked inside a car, dial 9-1-1 or your local emergency number immediately.
- Make sure you check the temperature of the car seat surface and safety belt buckles before restraining your children in the car.
- Use a light covering to shade the seat of your parked car. Consider using window shades in front and back windows.

Car trunks can be especially hazardous. Kids get in but can't always get out. In very hot weather, heat stroke may result and could lead to a permanent disability or even death in a matter of minutes. Here are some additional tips to protect your children:

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- Keep the trunk of your car locked at all times, especially when the car is parked in the driveway or near the home.
- Keep the rear fold-down seats closed to help prevent kids from getting into the trunk from inside the car.
- Put car keys out of children's reach and sight.
- Be wary of child-resistant locks. Teach children how to unlock the driver's door locks if they find themselves trapped in a motor vehicle.
- Contact your car dealership about getting your vehicle retrofitted with a trunk release mechanism.

The SAFE KIDS-GM “Never Leave Your Child Alone” brochure includes safety tips and information about the dangers of leaving children unattended in vehicles. It is free and available through Virginia Lancaster, coordinator of the Arkansas SAFE KIDS Coalition, at (501) 661-2278. The Arkansas SAFE KIDS Coalition is co-sponsored by the Arkansas Department of Health and Arkansas Children's Hospital.

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