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Clover Connection

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The Dangers of Leaving Children Alone In or Around Cars

Now that we are into summer in Texas, children are spending more time outdoors, which increases the danger of children being left alone in, and around, cars. When we think of children being left alone in cars, our first thought is the danger of children dying in hot cars due to heatstroke. But in addition to heat risks, there are other safety concerns with unsupervised children around cars — including back-overs, the risk of children releasing the gear shift or engaging electric windows, and even becoming trapped inside vehicles or trunks. According to the Safe Kids Worldwide, approximately 39 percent of back-over deaths occurred at home. Drivers in back-over and front-over deaths are often family members or family friends of the child.

Children are more at risk for heatstroke because a child's body temperature rises 3 to 5 times faster than an adult's. A heatstroke can occur at body temperatures above 104 degrees. Even mild outside temperatures can pose a threat, but with Texas summer temperatures climbing into the upper 90s each day, the danger becomes even greater. The problem is that temperatures in parked vehicles rise very quickly. According to figures from San Francisco State University's Department of Geosciences, in just 10 minutes, the temperature inside of a vehicle can increase by almost 20 degrees.

To reduce deaths from heatstroke, Safe Kids USA has launched a campaign titled ACT, which stands for: Avoid heatstroke-related injury, Create reminders, and Take action. The campaign is designed to link together these simple heatstroke prevention steps. It is important that parents and caregivers are on alert to avoid a heatstroke death, and that they share the ACT campaign steps with spouses, grandparents, babysitters, and other caregivers. Any change in schedule for drop-off or pickup of a child can lead to a deadly mistake. In more than half of the cases of heatstroke, the death was due to the child being "forgotten" by the caregiver. Such deaths are preventable when parents take precautions to make sure that children are not left alone in vehicles and cannot gain access to unlocked vehicles.

So far this year, 18 child vehicular heatstroke deaths have occurred in the U. S., including seven in Texas. Although many parents may think that this will never happen to them, it is a tragedy that can and has happened to many families.

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Passenger Safety department reminds parents to be extra vigilant to make sure that children are never left alone in or around parked vehicles. Follow these safety tips in this article to be sure that children cannot be harmed in a vehicle.

Children Left in Hot Vehicles

- Never leave infants or children in a parked vehicle, even if the windows are partially open.
- Make a habit of looking in the vehicle — front and back — before locking the door and walking away.
- Carefully check all seats in the van or bus to make sure there are no children sleeping on the seats or hiding under seats.
- Do not let children play in an unattended vehicle. Teach them that a vehicle is not a play area.
- Check with the family when a child does not show up for day care to be sure a parent has not forgotten a child in their vehicle.
- Always lock vehicle doors and trunks — and keep keys out of children's reach.
- If a child is missing, check the vehicle first, including the trunk or storage area.
- If a child is in distress due to heat, get them out as quickly as possible. Cool the child rapidly, then call 911 or your local emergency number immediately.

Children around Parked Vehicles

- Walk all the way around your parked vehicle to check for children, pets, or toys before getting in the car and starting the engine.
- Make sure young children are always accompanied by an adult when getting in and out of a car.
- Identify and use safe play areas for children away from parked or moving vehicles.
- Designate a safe spot for children to go when nearby vehicles are about to move.
- Firmly hold the hand of each child when walking near moving vehicles and when in driveways, parking lots, or sidewalks.
- Teach children not to play in and around vehicles.

Children Left in Running Vehicles

- Lock vehicles at all times, even in the garage or driveway.
- Never leave keys in the car.
- Store keys out of children's reach.
- Engage your emergency brake every time you park.
- Check to see if your vehicle has a Brake Transmission Safety Interlock (BTSI), which is a safety technology to prevent children from accidentally putting a vehicle into gear. Check your owner's manual to see if your vehicle is equipped with BTSI. After Sept. 1, 2010, all vehicles with an automatic transmission with a PARK position must have BTSI.

- Use drive-thru services when available.
- Use your debit or credit card to pay for gas at the pump.
- Lock the power windows so that children cannot play with and cannot get caught in them. Power windows can strangle a child or cut off a finger.

Following these safety tips can make all the difference in avoiding a needless tragedy!

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