



June 1, 2018

Clover Connection

By: Kate Marshall,
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With summer temperatures climbing to triple digits, now is a good time to remind Texans of the dangers of children getting heat stroke while left unattended in vehicles, said a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service passenger safety expert.

Bev Kellner, AgriLife Extension family and community health program manager in College Station, said it's important to remember that as temperatures increase so does the likelihood of heat stroke and death for children left in hot vehicles.

“Temperatures in parked vehicles rise very quickly and a child’s body temperature rises three to five times faster than an adult’s, so the combination can be deadly,” Kellner said. “And children are far more vulnerable to heat stroke than adults.”

Kellner said in just 10 minutes, the temperature inside a vehicle can increase by almost 20 degrees.

“Hyperthermia or heat stroke can occur at body temperatures above 104 degrees and even mild exterior temperatures can pose a threat,” she said. “And contrary to popular belief, cracking a window does little or nothing to dispel the heat from the interior of the vehicle.”

Kellner said Texas leads the nation in child vehicular heat deaths, with 114 deaths from 1989 to 2017.

“This gave Texas the unwanted distinction of being first in the nation in child vehicular heat deaths,” she said. “And already this year, there have been seven such deaths in the U.S., with one of them in Texas.”

Kellner said because more than half of these deaths are due to caregivers forgetting they have a child in the vehicle, these deaths are entirely preventable if a few precautions are taken.

“The other side of that coin is making sure children cannot gain access to unlocked vehicles, as nearly one-third of these deaths are from children getting trapped inside an unlocked vehicle,” Kellner said.

Johnny Humphreys, chair of the Texas Heatstroke Task Force, said most child vehicular heat deaths can be avoided by following some simple steps, such as the guidelines of the ACT prevention statement of Safe Kids Worldwide.

“The ‘A’ stands for avoid heatstroke injury by never leaving your child alone in a car,” Humphreys said. “Always lock your doors and trunks, including in your driveway or garage. The ‘C’ stands for routinely creating a reminder so you will check the back seat before you park and leave the vehicle. And the ‘T’ means to take action by calling 911 when you see a child left alone in a vehicle.”

Humphreys said Safe Kids Worldwide has released new prevention toolkits available for download at <https://www.safekids.org/take-action-prevent-heatstroke>.

“There are toolkits available for educators, parents, child care providers and first responders,” he said. “All of them include useful materials such as infographics and talking points.”

Humphreys said anyone interested in being part of the Texas Heatstroke Task Force, a statewide network of community educators who include heatstroke awareness or prevention in their daily activities, may email him at Humphreys.Johnny@gmail.com. They may also contact the task force at texasheatstroketaaskforce@gmail.com to receive monthly updates regarding heat stroke and heat stroke awareness and prevention resources.

Additionally, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration will conduct a child heat stroke prevention media campaign leading up to National Heatstroke Prevention Day July 31.

Kellner said to help avoid child vehicular heat deaths, parents and other caregivers should consider the following tips from Safe Kids and AgriLife Extension:

On leaving a child in a hot vehicle:

- 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.
- When parking a multi-passenger vehicle, make sure there are no children sleeping on the seats or hiding under them.
- Put a purse, briefcase, gym bag, cellphone or another item that will be needed in the back seat to help ensure you look there before leaving the vehicle.

— Set the alarm on your cellphone or computer calendar as a reminder to verify you have not left a child unattended in your vehicle.

— If you see an unattended child in a vehicle, dial 911 immediately and follow any instructions provided by emergency personnel.

On children getting into parked vehicles:

— Teach children not to play in and around vehicles.

— Always lock vehicles, even when in the garage or driveway.

— Never leave keys in the car and store them out of children's reach.

— Identify and use safe play areas for children away from parked or moving vehicles.

“Also, if a caregiver notices a child is missing, it's always a good idea to make your vehicle one of the first places to look, including the trunk or storage area,” Kellner said.

She also noted other ways to help avoid children being accidentally locked in hot vehicles are to use drive-thru services when available and to pay for gas at the pump with a debit or credit card as opposed to going inside.

“We hope if people use these preventive measures we can avoid further needless child vehicular heat deaths,” Kellner said.

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