

Children very vulnerable to heatstroke if left in vehicles

It is a familiar, heartbreaking story that comes with summer heat-waves in Canada ? a child left in a vehicle overheats and dies from heatstroke.

Even when the day seems relatively mild, 20 minutes is all it takes for the interior of a vehicle to reach extreme temperatures. These conditions can cause a child to go into shock and sustain vital organ failure.

Tragedies like these are preventable. The Canada Safety Council urges parents and caregivers to be aware of and recognize the inherent dangers of leaving a child unattended, especially in a confined space such as a car on a hot day. The advice is simple: Never leave a child alone in a vehicle ? not even for a minute.

Heat can be dangerous and deadly

Heat levels in a car exposed to the sun on a 35-C (95-F) day can soar to 50-C (122-F) within 20 minutes. Heat stroke, meanwhile, occurs at 40.5-C (105-F). When the body's core temperature reaches this point, sweat reserves are depleted and a person's body is no longer able to cool itself. At this point, the body's core temperature shoots even higher, resulting in severe organ damage and (without intervention) death.

Children are especially sensitive to heat exposure because their sweat glands are not fully developed, which means their bodies are not capable of cooling down quickly. When exposed to heat, a child's body temperature rises three times faster than an adult in the same conditions.

Safety recommendations

Incidents of children being forgotten in a vehicle can occur if otherwise responsible parents and caregivers are distracted, fatigued or if there is a break in daily routine. However, extra care and vigilance is all it takes to ensure the safety of children and all other vehicle occupants, such as pets and elderly persons.

As a reminder that there is a child in the vehicle, put something that's needed, such as a cell phone, near the child in the backseat.

Alternately or in addition, keep a toy on the front seat as a visual reminder that a child's on board.

Develop the habit of consciously checking that all occupants are out of the vehicle before it is parked and locked. For example, lock the vehicle using the key, rather than a remote. Use these few seconds to scan the interior of the vehicle to make sure that no one has been left behind.

If there is a childcare provider, ask him or her to make contact in the event that the child does not show up. This can be an important safeguard especially if the child could be taken to their childcare site by several people, such as a spouse or another family member.

If a child is seen alone in a locked vehicle, call 9-1-1 to get help.

Fatalities can also occur if a child enters an unlocked vehicle and is unable to get out. Vehicle owners should keep the doors and the trunk locked at all times while the vehicle is parked and unattended.

Do not teach children how to unlock a vehicle or override safety features. Keep keys in a safe location.