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Children at Risk in Hot Cars

Texas AgriLife Extension Agent, Denita Young, reminds parents that summertime is almost here, and with the increase in temperatures, the danger of children dying from being left unattended in vehicles increases.

Temperatures in parked vehicles can rise very quickly. According to San Francisco State University's department of geosciences, in just 10 minutes the temperature can increase by almost 20 degrees. A child's body temperature rises three to five times faster than an adult's, making children more vulnerable to a deadly condition known as hyperthermia or heat stroke.

At a body temperature above 104 degrees, heat stroke can occur.

Although even mild outside temperatures can be dangerous, with Texas temperatures climbing into the upper 90s each day, the danger becomes even greater.

Janette Fennell, founder and president of the Kids and Cars program, reports that there have been six hyperthermia deaths nationally so far this year. Fortunately, there have been none in Texas so far in 2009. However, last year in Texas, there were nine vehicle heat-related deaths. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, there were 42 deaths nationally last year. Texas leads the nation with the highest number of vehicle hyperthermia deaths – 52 for the years 1998-2008.

During this time period, more than half of the deaths were due to the child being 'forgotten' in the vehicle by the caregiver. Parents and care givers can take precautions to prevent these needless deaths by making sure that children are not left alone in vehicles and cannot have access to unlocked vehicles.

National Safe Kids reports that one-third of the heat-related deaths in 2000 were due to children becoming trapped in a vehicle they had crawled into.

Here are some safety tips from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:

Never leave infants or children in a parked vehicle, even if the windows are partially open. Do not let children play in an unattended vehicle. Teach them that a vehicle is not a play area. Make a habit of looking in the vehicle – front and back – before locking the door and walking away.

If you are dropping a child off at childcare, and normally it's your spouse or partner who drops them off, have your spouse or partner call you to make sure the drop went according to plan.

Ask your childcare provider to call you if your child does not show up for childcare.

Do things to remind yourself that a child is in the vehicle, such as writing yourself a note and putting the note where you will see it when you leave the vehicle; placing your purse, briefcase, or something else you need in the back seat so that you will have to check the back seat when you leave the vehicle. Another reminder is to keep an object in the car seat, such as a stuffed toy. When the child is buckled in, place the object where the driver will notice it when he or she is leaving the vehicle.

Always lock vehicle doors and the trunk, and keep keys out of children's reach.

If a child is missing, check the vehicle first, including the trunk.

If you see a child alone in a hot vehicle, call the police.

If a child is in distress due to heat, get them out of the vehicle as quickly as possible. Cool the child rapidly. Call 911 or your local emergency number immediately.

While there are already some electronic gadgets on the market to help prevent these needless tragedies, the best precaution is to be vigilant and follow these safety recommendations.

For more information on this topic, please call the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903-473-5000, ext. 157..

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