

COMMUNITY COMMENT, AUGUST 7, 2012

This is Officer Matt Harvey with the California Highway Patrol for Community Comment.

An avoidable mistake can turn deadly in a matter of minutes at the expense of a helpless and innocent victim. As a parent of young children, my heart sinks every time I hear of the death of a child as a result of heat stroke from being left inside a vehicle.

As the summer temperature continues to rise, so does the risk of vehicular hyperthermia, also known as heat stroke, especially for a child left inside a hot vehicle. Regardless of how or why a child is left behind, the end result can be devastating. To prevent the tragedy of a young child's death, "Kaitlyn's Law" was enacted in California in 2002 following the heat-related death of 6-month-old Kaitlyn Marie Russell. Sadly, Kaitlyn was left unattended in a parked vehicle on a hot summer day.

On a typical sunny day, the temperature inside a vehicle can reach a potentially deadly level within minutes. There is no excuse for leaving a child alone in a vehicle, not even for a few minutes.

California law prohibits anyone from leaving a child six years old or younger unattended in a motor vehicle without the supervision of someone who is 12 years or older when: there are conditions that present a significant risk to the child's health or safety, or when the vehicle's engine is running and/or the vehicle's key is in the ignition.

The CHP often receives reports of children left unattended in vehicles in grocery store parking lots, curbside, and other public parking facilities. In talking with the parent or caregiver, we hear excuses such as, "I had to pick up a few items in the store and I didn't want to wake up my sleeping child", or "I don't usually take my child to the post office and I forgot she was in the back seat."

In a given 20 minute time span, a parked vehicle's inside temperature can rise 29 degrees, often times substantially exceeding the outside temperature. Cracking the window has little effect.

While the law prohibits it, sadly, even the best of parents or caregivers can overlook a sleeping baby in a vehicle; and the end result can be injury or even death. For this reason, the CHP encourages parents or caregivers to develop a plan, or a habit, which serves as a reminder of where a child is at all times.

Be sure all occupants leave the vehicle when unloading. Always lock your car and ensure children don't have access to keys or remote entry devices. Place your purse or briefcase in the back seat as a reminder that you have your child in the car.

A few simple precautions can go a long way toward keeping a child safe. No matter what the weather is like, or length of time you need to be away from the vehicle, leaving a child unattended in a vehicle is very risky and can result in tragedy.

Finally, the public is also encouraged to take an active role in safeguarding children who may be left unattended in a vehicle by dialing 9-1-1 immediately and following the instructions that emergency personnel provide.

For additional information regarding Kaitlyn's Law or any non-emergency, you can contact the California Highway Patrol at 1-800-TELL-CHP.

This has been Officer Matt Harvey with the California Highway Patrol for Community Comment.