

Kid-in-car warning systems getting a big push

September 14 2010, By Jayne O'Donnell

Safety advocates are urging Congress and regulators to force carmakers to install warning systems that would prevent distracted parents from leaving children in cars, preventing heatstroke deaths.

At least 41 [children](#) have died already this year in hot cars, more than in any previous year at this point. August was the deadliest month on record, according to the advocacy group Kids and Cars.

Although much of the U.S. had record temperatures from May to July, meteorologist Jan Null says the temperature in a closed [car](#) can rise 19 degrees in 10 minutes and 43 degrees in an hour, so even cooler days present risks.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is considering a petition to include safety belt reminder chimes for all seating positions. In comments she planned to submit to NHTSA, Kids and Cars President Janette Fennell says these same chimes that sense if people aren't buckled in should also warn if children are still buckled in cars after they're locked.

Safety groups including the Consumer Federation of America and Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety also plan to push for language that requires driver-reminder chimes for kids in cars to be included soon in sweeping highway legislation.

"If you're going to have a reminder system for people to buckle up, why

not remind them if they haven't taken the child out of the seat?" asks Jackie Gillan, vice president of the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety.

While NHTSA says it plans to evaluate technology that could address the problem, the agency stressed that parents and passersby must recognize the risk to kids in hot cars.

"While there may be technologies that help remind parents to never leave a child alone in a car, nothing can replace the need for a parent to be vigilant," says NHTSA chief David Strickland.

Still, consumer groups say they're frustrated that once-promising technology to prevent deaths to children locked in hot cars isn't available.

Automakers say it's not as easy as it sounds. Using sensors to detect heat, heartbeats and/or the weight of children can be an inexact science, as is deciding when to sound alarms.

- General Motors has considered several types of technology to warn drivers that a child is in the back seat, including alarms that sound when the inside of a car gets dangerously hot and a person is still inside. GM spokesman Alan Adler says none of the approaches "are reliable enough to put in a vehicle," but says GM is still trying to find a solution.
- Auto supplier Delphi patented child-seat technology in 2007 that warns when the temperature around a child seat gets too high. Delphi spokeswoman Barbara Graves says some automakers "have shown interest in the technology" but none currently plans to install it on their cars.
- NASA engineers filed a patent in late 2001 on technology that would

alert drivers moments after they locked a child in a car. Chris Edwards, the lead inventor, says he, too, has attracted interest from automakers but no contracts. Edwards and two other engineers invented the device after a colleague's infant died after being left in the car.

Mukul Verma, an auto safety consultant and former top GM safety expert, says seat belt reminders that also warn parents children are still in cars aren't necessarily warning about a dangerous situation. Warning systems need to alert parents there is "the possibility of injury or death due to extra heat" or parents may become annoyed and ignore or disconnect the systems.

"There is no doubt that something needs to be done," says Verma. But any in-car system "has to be completely foolproof in achieving its purpose."

From 1998 through 2009, 51 percent of the deaths involved children forgotten in cars, 30 percent were children playing in unattended vehicles and 18 percent were intentionally left in cars, says Null.

It would take more than a decade for all cars to have any new technology, making public awareness the most important step, says Kyle Johnson, spokesman for the child safety group Safe Kids Worldwide. He urges people to lock their cars and keep keys out of reach of kids, which he notes would prevent many of the deaths.

But advocates insist technology is the answer. "We have reminders in our cars for lights, keys, doors, tire pressure and fuel," says Consumer Federation of America spokesman Jack Gillis. "Reminders regarding our most precious cargo are an absolute must."

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