



## Office of the Child Advocate

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[www.gachildadvocate.org](http://www.gachildadvocate.org)



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### Kids and Cars: Don't Let a Busy Schedule Create a Disaster

By Tom C. Rawlings  
State Child Advocate for the Protection of Children

With school in session and fall sports and activities for kids in full swing, parents are frantically driving children to and fro. So it's a good time to remember that the combination of a stressed and distracted parent, a young child, a hectic schedule, and a car can be a tragic one. This summer has seen several tragic deaths of young children left in hot cars. Each year in excess of 30 children nationwide die after being left strapped in the backseat of an automobile, often by a harried, busy parent who made the tragic mistake of going to work and forgetting that he or she *didn't* drop the child off at daycare or preschool. While the temperatures are falling from summer highs, even fall days in Georgia can get quite warm, and the inside of a car can heat quickly and become deadly for a young child. Just a week ago in the metro Atlanta area, a seven month-old child died of overheating after his parents accidentally left him in the car for several hours. The high temperature outside that day was only 81 degrees, but the temperature inside a car can get much higher very quickly.

Frenzied schedules can also lead parents to neglect the proper use of child safety seats, especially with children in preschool and the early grades. Children need at least a "booster" seat until they are big enough to be protected by a standard seat belt: around 4'9" tall. A recent study showed that while parents placed their children ages 0-3 in proper child seats well over 90% of the time, 58% of children aged 4-7 were not being properly protected. The results are tragic: 50,000 children between the ages of four and seven are injured each year in automobile accidents, and of those half are unrestrained.

Perhaps the most common result of our busy parental schedules is that even when we use appropriate car seats, we don't ensure they are properly latched and secured. A 2005 survey of actual car seat use showed that over 70% of the time parents had not properly secured either the safety seat to the car or the child to the seat. So what can parents and concerned citizens do to make sure these preventable injuries and deaths don't occur? Here are a few suggestions.

First, **slow down and think!** While we have many laws requiring child restraint use and many examples where parents have been prosecuted after their children died in hot cars, no law is a more effective deterrent than a patient adult who loves his or her children enough to protect them. A number of relatively inexpensive devices are on the market to help parents remember those sleeping babes in the back seat. From keychain reminders to devices under \$100 that sound an alarm if you travel more than ten feet from the car when baby remains in the car seat, the technology is there to help parents protect their children from the dangers of a hot vehicle. A description of some of those tools can be found at [www.kidsandcars.org](http://www.kidsandcars.org).

Second, **be on the lookout!** Especially on warm days, as you walk through the parking lot at your work or local shopping center, take notice of the cars around you to make sure there are no children left there. The young mother who lost her child in a hot car in Macon this summer parked in the staff parking lot of the hospital where she worked. Unfortunately, no other employee passed by and noticed the child sleeping in the back seat of the parked car. Likewise, when you are driving and see very young children unrestrained in a moving car, don't be afraid to pick up your cell phone, call the police, and give them the tag number. Your phone call may help save that child's life.

Third, **stop in for a safety check!** Many local health departments, community organizations and civic clubs regularly sponsor child restraint checks to help parents ensure they are properly using these important safety devices. For information on child safety seat checks in your area, visit [www.safekidsgeorgia.org](http://www.safekidsgeorgia.org) and click on "Child Safety Seat Inspection Information," or visit the Georgia Traffic Injury Prevention Institute's website at [www.ridesafegeorgia.org](http://www.ridesafegeorgia.org) and click on "Find a Seat Check."

Georgia's Office of the Child Advocate works hand-in-hand with the many agencies, groups, and individuals across this state who are working to help keep our children safe and sound. If you would like more information on protecting children in your community from the dangers associated with motor vehicles, visit some of the following websites where you can find contacts, suggestions, and the studies cited in this column:

- The Georgia Division of Public Health's Injury Prevention Section: <http://health.state.ga.us/programs/injuryprevention/occsafety.asp>
- The Governor's Office of Highway Safety: [www.georgiahighwaysafety.org](http://www.georgiahighwaysafety.org)
- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: [www.nhtsa.gov](http://www.nhtsa.gov)

And if you'd like to know more about how you can assist at-risk children in your community, contact us at the Office of the Child Advocate. Our website is [www.gachildadvocate.org](http://www.gachildadvocate.org)

*Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached at [tom@gachildadvocate.org](mailto:tom@gachildadvocate.org)*

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