

# The Parents Report:

## Keeping Your Child Safe In and Around Motor Vehicles

### Report Summary

For years, traffic safety advocates have focused on the leading cause of death to children, motor vehicle crashes. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that nine out of ten vehicle-related child fatalities result from crashes on public streets and highways. The remaining ten percent occur in incidents that take place on private property and usually aren't included in state or national traffic records systems.

These incidents include vehicle backovers, trunk entrapments, heat-related injuries and deaths (hyperthermia), getting caught in power windows and inadvertently putting the vehicle in motion by moving the shift lever. The limited information available suggests that most fatalities result from vehicle backovers and hyperthermia. While it isn't known how many occur each year, it is clear that they happen all too frequently. The common thread in these tragedies is that they almost always involve an unattended or unsupervised child.

New technologies in motor vehicles have the potential to help prevent many of these incidents in the future, however, effective devices to alert caregivers or passers by that a child has been left in a car have not been developed. While camera systems to help prevent backovers are finding their way into the marketplace, few vehicles are equipped with them today. Even if every new vehicle sold today had a backup camera system, it would take more than a decade to equip the entire vehicle fleet, the equivalent of two generations of one to five year-olds.

While technology will be an important factor in preventing these tragedies in the future, active supervision of children by parents and caregivers is the key to saving lives now. Parents are the most important safety feature available to help prevent these tragedies today, tomorrow and in the foreseeable future.

There is still much to be learned about these incidents. There are no national guidelines and few educational materials designed to help prevent them.

As a first step, ACTS commissioned a telephone survey of parents to discover what they know, what they do and what they think is normal parenting behavior. Building on what it learned from the survey, ACTS developed an educational

brochure and a new website ([www.safetyfeature.org](http://www.safetyfeature.org)) with tips and other information for parents and caregivers. Both the brochure and website have English and Spanish language versions.

ACTS is distributing the brochure through State Highway Safety Offices, automobile dealerships, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) programs throughout the country. The brochure and Parents Report are also available on the website as PDF files that can be easily downloaded and reproduced by individuals or organizations.

This Parents Report summarizes the key findings in ACTS survey. It also gives an idea of what other parents think is normal and appropriate supervision, it shares information about risks to children in and around cars and, most importantly, it provides tips to help keep children safe.

### The Current Picture

Because incidents that don't occur on public roads usually aren't included in traffic records systems, no one knows how many children are injured or killed. Studies conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and others suggest that 150 or more children die annually in backover incidents. When heat-related and other incident types are added, it is apparent that more than 200 children die in non-crash vehicle incidents each year. It appears, based on media reports, that most fatalities and injuries involve toddlers less than five years of age.

Protecting an active toddler requires much more attention than monitoring a responsible 10-year-old. There are no specific national age guidelines available for supervision comparable to those for using child restraints and booster seats. As children grow more independent, less parental supervision puts them at risk for injuries. In many cases, active supervision could have prevented injuries.

### ACTS Parents Survey

While there are no specific national age guidelines on supervision practices, ACTS new national survey of parents provides a sense of what other parents are doing. This first of its kind survey asked 900 parents of children age

twelve and under about risks associated with kids in and around cars and what they thought was normal supervisory behavior. The telephone survey was conducted for ACTS by Marketing for Change in January 2007. There were no differences between parents' responses by region, ethnicity, or town size. The margin of error was +/- 3.27%.

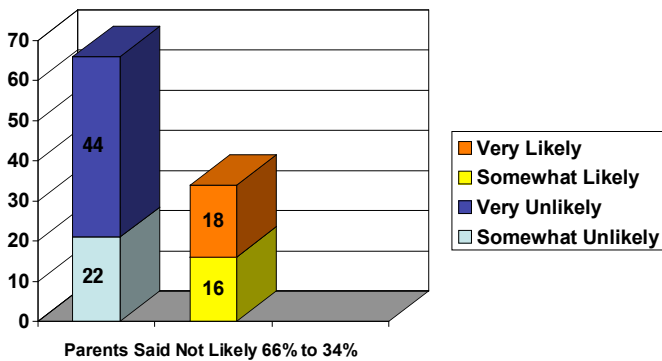
The intent of this report is to give parents and caregivers an idea of what other parents think is normal and some tips for preventing injuries in and around cars.

## Risks

Most parents perceived the risks to unattended children in and around cars to be low. Two thirds of parents thought it unlikely or very unlikely that a child in their neighborhood might die from the heat after being left alone in a car.

### Perceived Risk:

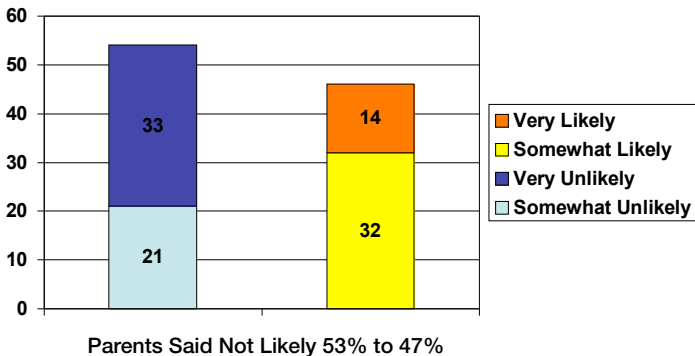
How likely is a child to die from heat after being left alone in a car?



Less than half (46 percent) thought it likely that a car backing out of a driveway might hit a child.

### Perceived Risk:

How likely is a child to be hit by a car backing out of a driveway?



However, the findings also showed that 44 percent of parents have known someone whose child was hit by a car.

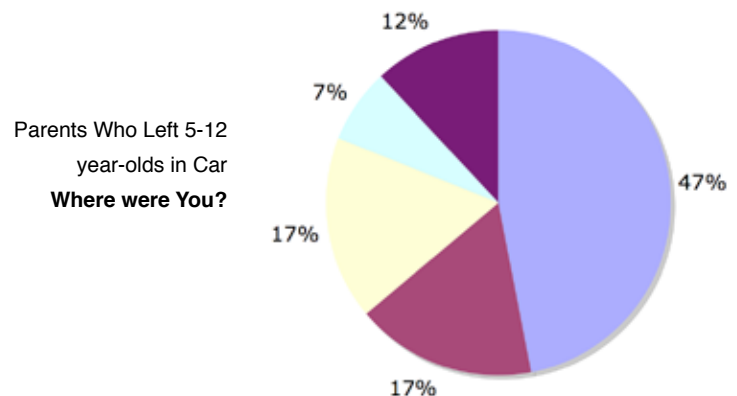
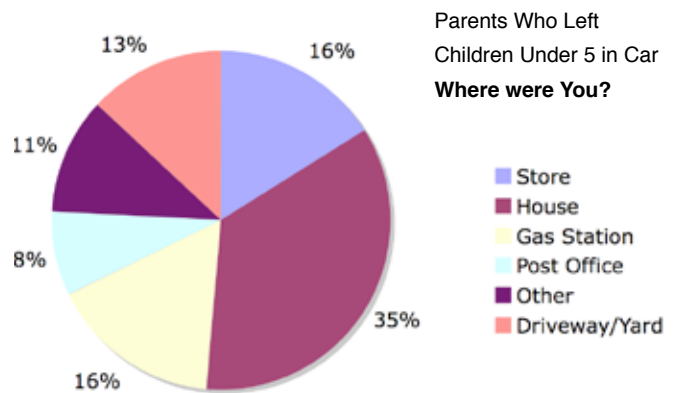
## Parent Norms

Most parents do a pretty good job of supervising their children. Here's what they told ACTS about the ages at which they thought it was OK for kids to be subject to less direct supervision:

### Parent Norms About Supervision



61 percent of parents with 5 to 12 year olds and 86 percent of parents with children under age 5 said they never leave a child alone in a car. The parents that said they sometimes left their child unattended in a car reported that the average time 5 to 12 year olds were left alone was less than three minutes. Children under age 5 were reportedly left alone for less than one minute. Here's where parents said they were when they reported leaving their kids alone in a motor vehicle:



## TIPS

- Walk completely around your vehicle before getting in.
- Firmly hold a child's hand when in parking lots and driveways.
- Check your vehicle (or one you are thinking about buying) by trying to move the transmission out of park without depressing the brake pedal in all key positions. If you can shift the car into Drive, Neutral or Reverse, it does not have the new type interlock system.
- Regardless of what type brake transmission interlock system your vehicle has, leave the vehicle locked and the keys where children can't easily access them to keep children from playing in unattended vehicles.
- Know where children are. Have children stand in a place where they're in full view.
- Teach children to move away from a vehicle whenever it is started.
- Consider adding a backup detection device to your vehicle.
- Try before you buy. Make sure the detection system you are thinking of purchasing meets your expectations for effectiveness and ease of use.
- Practice and become familiar with any backup detection device in vehicles you own or drive.
- Look at the power window switches in a vehicle you are thinking about buying to see if the windows could be easily closed by a child accidentally stepping on, or putting weight on, the window switch.
- Always keep parked vehicles locked and keys secure from children.
- Show children the glow-in-the-dark trunk handle release. When they are strong enough, teach them how to use it properly.
- If you have an older car (pre-2001), consider having it retrofitted with a trunk release handle by your dealership.

Perhaps most importantly, 9 out of 10 parents surveyed agreed that children need more supervision than they're getting to prevent injuries in and around cars.

## Supervision

What does "supervision" mean? Some parents define supervision as being close-by and available as needed, rather than being directly involved in the child's activities. Your actions may differ when you are in what seems like a safer versus a more high-risk environment. Here's a start:

### Supervising Children Around Cars

#### PARKED AND MOVING VEHICLES

Teach children never to play in or around vehicles and to move away from a vehicle whenever it is started. Know where your children are any time you are preparing to get into a vehicle and drive away.

#### HOLDING HANDS

When holding a child's hand – near a street or driveway, in a parking lot or anywhere – you offer them another pair of eyes to watch for danger.

Most parents hold their child's hand until they are 7½ years old.

### Supervising Children In Cars

#### BUCKLING UP

Parents agree it's the right thing to do – the challenge is making it happen. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among children. You can protect your child in the car – not just by making sure they're properly restrained, but also by acting as a role model. Most Americans do buckle up – but research shows that when parents in particular are buckled up, their kids are much more likely to be.

Even older children tell us the most effective way to get them in a seat belt is simply for the driver to ask. When you start the car, buckle up and don't move until your child is properly restrained as well.

While most parents obey child restraint and booster laws, studies show that as children leave booster seats behind, not as many are wearing their seat belts. It's common for parents of tweens and teens to feel that their kids aren't listening as much. But parenting research shows again and again that parents are still the ones kids listen to. You have more influence than you think!

### Unattended Children In Cars

When is it OK to leave your child alone in a car? It's a decision parents face on a daily basis – when they're paying for gas, a quick run into the store, a dash back into the house for a forgotten item.

Experts agree parents shouldn't leave children unattended in a car.

- The temperature in a vehicle can reach a deadly level in minutes, and the child can suffer from heat stroke when their core temperature reaches only 104 degrees.
- In just 10 minutes a car's internal temperature can increase 19 degrees and can quickly reach 140 degrees or higher.
- There have been numerous cases of parents leaving children briefly inside the car to run an errand when a carjacking took place.

- There are no national guidelines stating at what age it is OK to leave a child unattended in a vehicle, but of the parents ACTS asked:
- 9 out of 10 said they have never left a child under 5 alone in a car.
- 3 out of 5 said the same about any child age 5 to 12.

## Vehicle Technologies

A number of technologies to help prevent injuries to children in and around vehicles are now available or will be soon. It is important to remember that while technology can help keep your child safe, it is not a replacement for an alert and careful parent.

### Power Window Switches

Most new cars and trucks have power window switches designed to prevent a child from accidentally closing the window. Starting in 2008, all new vehicles will have these “pull to close” switches. Some vehicles also have power windows that automatically reverse when an object (like a child’s arm or neck) is in the path of a closing window.

### Brake-Transmission System Interlocks

These devices prevent children from moving the vehicle's transmission out of Park to reduce the risk of unintended vehicle movement. While all vehicles with automatic transmissions have brake transmission interlocks, some do not function in all key positions. All passenger vehicles will have brake transmission interlocks that work in all key positions by the year 2010.

### Camera & Sensor Systems to Identify Rear Objects

Several types of rear camera and sensor systems are currently available. Most are offered as optional equipment by vehicle manufacturers or as after-market equipment. Some are designed primarily to assist drivers in parking their vehicles. The ability of these devices to identify children behind a vehicle varies but some (particularly cameras) have the potential to help alert drivers to children behind their vehicle as they are preparing to back up. They can be particularly helpful in cars and trucks that have large blind spots behind the vehicle.

### Trunk Release Handles

All vehicles manufactured after 2001 have glow-in-the-dark trunk release handles to make it easier for a trapped individual to open the trunk and escape. But, cars aren't playgrounds. Young children can become quickly and easily confused to the point that they can't help themselves when they are trapped or in frightening situations.

## Parents: The Most Important Safety Feature

Of all the safety features on today's cars - - YOU are the most important one. Utilizing what we learned in the survey, ACTS has developed educational materials and tips to help make your job easier. To help reach more families, our new brochure and website are available in both English and Spanish.

## The Brochure

Our brochure is short and to the point with important tips for parents and caregivers. It is being distributed in automobile dealerships, in Women, Infant and Children (WIC) centers, by state highway safety agencies and others. Starting this fall, ACTS will be working with Safe Kids Worldwide to make these available to coalitions across the country as a supplement to their national Safety In and Around Cars Initiative. The brochure is also available on the website for easy reproduction.

## The Website

The new bilingual website, [www.safetyfeature.org](http://www.safetyfeature.org), provides information about the risks, as well as guidelines and tips. Parents and caregivers can take a survey to see how their practices compare to parents interviewed in our 2007 national survey. The website has a more comprehensive set of tips than the brochure and includes information about vehicle technologies that can help parents prevent incidents to children in and around cars.

## Resources

The following organizations have safety programs that can help parents keep children safe and/or free educational materials.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration  
Motor vehicle safety regulations, traffic crash data, educational materials  
[www.nhtsa.gov](http://www.nhtsa.gov)

Safe Kids Worldwide  
Educational materials, community safety programs, chapters in all 50 states  
[www.safekids.org](http://www.safekids.org)

State highway safety offices in all 50 states  
Educational materials, state and community safety programs  
<http://www.ghsa.org/html/links/highwaysafetywebsites.html>