



Forgotten Baby Syndrome: Why parents leave children in hot cars

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Forgotten Baby Syndrome (FBS) is a term most parents have hopefully never heard. It refers to accidentally leaving a baby or young child in a locked car, often with tragic results.

Unfortunately, each year in the US, nearly 40 families experience FBS when their child dies after being left in the heat of a parked car. In fact, there were 25 deaths in 2015, and so far in 2016, there have been more than a dozen children dying due to heatstroke in cars. This is an almost 300 percent increase compared to this same time last year. How could this happen? Were those parents intoxicated, mentally ill, or just grossly negligent?

The answers to those questions are usually no. On the contrary, the great majority of families who experience this tragedy are loving caregivers, devoted to raising children, and devastated by these accidents.

Forgotten Baby Syndrome is the medical explanation for how a parent can walk away from a car without realizing their child remains inside. Dr. David Diamond, a professor of psychology, molecular pharmacology, and physiology at the University of South Florida, Tampa, spends time researching the neurobiology of FBS. According to Dr. Diamond, each day people perform tasks that become routine, involving little conscious thought and are therefore governed by a part of the brain called the motor cortex. A good example is driving home from work each day using the same route. Eventually, we can do it seemingly without thinking. Dr. Diamond explains, "in effect, our motor memory frees us up to think about the future while completing the task at hand."

Then there is the part of the brain responsible for making a clear decision, for example, to stop at the store on your way home from work. This is called the *hippocampus*, and it controls the cognitive portion of our brains. Dr. Diamond explains that in FBS, the motor memory part of our brain competes against the cognitive part of the brain, overruling it.

In this example, that would mean leaving work with the intent of stopping at the store and then finding yourself in your garage having forgotten that you intended to make a stop elsewhere. This phenomenon happens as a normal part of our brain's function and not because there is something wrong with our brain structure.

In the case of FBS, two things often happen. First, a caregiver varies from their normal routine. For example, a caregiver that does not usually transport a child to daycare may do so on this day. They then drive to work as normal, the motor cortex out-thinking the cognitive brain and leading the parent to completely forget their child is in the back. They go about their day with no recollection of their intent to drop a child off and looking forward to seeing the child in the evening.

To prevent these tragedies, we first have to think about them. Know that this can happen to anyone and be proactive each time a child is transported. Consider checking the back seat as part of your car exiting routine. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has launched a **Look Before You Lock** campaign to remind people who transport children to check the rear of the vehicles before locking and leaving their cars.

Visit kidsandcars.org for a great list of resources for preventing FBS as well as other vehicle-related accidents.