

# State legislatures pass laws to save kids, pets trapped in hot vehicles



**Bill Moak**

CONSUMER WATCH

Every year, with the hot weather come tragic stories of how someone left a child in a hot vehicle, leading to death or serious injuries. Especially here in the Sun Belt, where we're used to long, hot summers, cars can be a death trap

if a child is left inside.

In the past three decades, nationally more than 800 children have died after being left in hot vehicles, and the organization Kidsandcars.org has documented 23 cases so far this year.

In one of the latest cases, a Tennessee couple was charged with murder after their 2-year-old son died. The couple allegedly left the child in a vehicle overnight and into the next day in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Cases abound, as an internet search will attest.

While the outside temperature can

be tolerable, inside a vehicle it's a different story. An enclosed vehicle acts as a greenhouse, with the sun's rays warming the interior as their energy is trapped inside. The website heatkills.org reports that, even on a mild 70-degree day, temperatures inside a car can easily reach 104 degrees in 30 minutes. And at 90 degrees (we've seen those temperatures in the last week in central Mississippi), temperatures inside the car can soar to 109 degrees in

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10 minutes, and after a half-hour to 124 degrees. Some studies have reported temperatures as high as 172 degrees when it's 100 degrees outside.

Even at the lower end of that scale, heat-related deaths can easily occur. And although many people continue to believe that cracking the window for your pet helps, most experts disagree. The American Academy of Pediatrics released a study in 2005 that opening a window a few inches does little to alleviate the temperature rise.

The spate of child deaths has rightly led to increased calls for action, as well as additional laws and demands for new technologies to keep these tragedies from occurring. According to [kidsandcars.org](http://kidsandcars.org), about half of the states have laws specifically making it a crime to leave a child or pet in a hot vehicle (Mississippi, regrettably, does not.) Hopefully, as states around the nation take legislative action, these laws will also include language to protect pets.

Frequently, an endangered pet is discovered by passersby. Bystanders who see a potential deadly situation have a decision to make. While many courageous people have risked lawsuits and even personal harm by breaking into an unattended vehicle to rescue a trapped pet, others might fear the repercussions of taking action.

Recently, several states have passed laws to protect people who must break into a vehicle to save a

pet trapped inside. For example, in Colorado and other states, would-be rescuers must take a number of other steps before they start breaking windows, including making "every reasonable effort" to locate the vehicle's owner and call law enforcement. They must also be able to demonstrate the pet is clearly in danger from suffocation or extreme heat or cold. Many state laws specifically limit the term "animal" or "pet" to cats and dogs, and specifically prohibit the law from referring to livestock.

Most state laws, according to a study earlier this year by Michigan State University, require that the rescuer be a first-responder (such as a police officer, EMT or firefighter), or a representative of a humane society. Ordinary citizens in most states are not of-

fered any protection or immunity. Of course, many pet lovers will take action anyway, disregarding the potential risk of a nasty confrontation or being charged with destruction of property.

But until we have better laws protecting kids — and pets — left in hot vehicles, perhaps the best response is to leave your pets at home if possible. And you see an animal in obvious distress in a vehicle, the Humane Society of the United States suggests you to locate the owner, and if that fails, call the non-emergency number for the police to report the situation

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