

STATEMENT OF JANETTE FENNELL

PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER OF KIDS AND CAR SAFETY

Since 1990, 1,086 children have died in hot cars. Each onesie here today represents a precious young life lost, leaving families shattered, and communities forever changed. 1,086 isn't just a number; these are stories of sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters, grandchildren, each with a future life full of promise. First responders, physicians, and nurses carry the trauma and weight of these devastating tragedies with them for the rest of their lives.

Today, you will hear from the infinitely courageous mothers of four children. As we prepared for this event, hanging each onesie was a feeling that is impossible to describe. Each clipped clothespin brought home the heartbreaking reality of what has been lost and was a chilling reminder of the tragic reality of what has been lost. We must work harder, faster, and smarter.

We have tried EVERYTHING we could to get technology added to vehicles over the past 20+ years. We have worked with members of Congress to draft legislation that could help prevent these needless tragedies, conducted countless national, state, and local education and media outreach campaigns, parents (and others) have written letters to members of Congress, engaged with the Department of Transportation and NHTSA in numerous meetings. I have personally met with Secretary Buttigieg. As our decades-long fight for technology drags on, I have had to ask these incredible families to tell their heartbreaking stories over and over again, year after year, decade after decade. Each retelling fractures their hearts anew, leaving them to endure unfathomable pain with every recounting. It is a sacrifice of their hearts every single time.

Thousands upon thousands of children have also been involved in non-fatal incidents. We have documented at least 7,500 non-fatal incidents, but the actual number is much higher. These children were saved from death in the nick of time but often not unscathed. Many suffer lifelong debilitating brain damage and injuries. Hundreds of children will never walk or talk again because their little bodies overheated, organ damage took place, and their lives (and everyone who loves their lives) were forever altered.

Imagine these children's contributions to the world had they grown up. Each onesie represents a mother who won't cry tears of joy on the first day of kindergarten. A father who will never walk their daughter down the aisle. The milestones that families will never experience are endless, and that's not right, especially when effective and cost-efficient solutions are available.

It feels futile to discuss money when confronted with such profound heartache, but the economic cost of these losses is enormous and unquantifiable.

We are here today not only to remember these children but also to prevent future tragedies. Simple steps like leaving personal items in the back seat, setting reminders, and always checking the back seat can save lives, but only if families believe they must do these actions and nobody thinks this will happen to them. Despite decades of educating parents and caregivers, the death toll continues to rise. Awareness of hot car dangers is at an all-time high, yet children continue to die. More must be done to prevent these needless deaths and severe injuries.

We will hear from a neuroscientist who has studied these types of deaths and can explain our 'all too human' condition that leads to these tragedies.

After decades of studying and educating about these dangers, the most effective solution remains to add occupant detection and alert technology to our vehicles to assist today's sleep-deprived, multitasking, stressed-out parents.

Why does every vehicle come with a reminder to turn off its headlights or do it automatically? Nobody wants a dead battery. But why do we accept that children continue to die in hot cars with no action taken? Dead batteries can be replaced; dead children cannot.

We hear about many products that can harm or kill children. When peanut butter is tainted, it's immediately pulled from store shelves. If there's an issue with infant formula, production stops, and it's removed from shelves. Yet, over 1,085 children have died in hot cars, and we are still waiting for action.

Consider the example of Trista Hamsmith, whose child died after swallowing a button battery. Trista, Founder of Reeses' Purpose, worked with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission after her 17-month-old daughter Reese tragically died in December 2020. A bill was introduced in August 2021, and President Biden signed it in August 2022, taking effect in March 2024. This law was enacted in less than two years. It can be done! Why has it taken so long for hot car tragedies? This should have been addressed years ago.

History shows that the auto industry has opposed most vital safety features in vehicles...seat belts, airbags, backup cameras, rollover technology (ESC), etc., as Joan Claybrook said in her remarks. We are so very fortunate to have with us today a car company that prioritizes a child's life over corporate profits. After our parents speak, we will see a demonstration of the technology that can detect if a child or pet is left alone in a vehicle.

Our families are really the heroes here today. To the families who have suffered this unimaginable loss, we stand with you. Your courage in sharing your stories helps prevent others from experiencing the same heartache.

Today, as we look at these onesies, let us commit to taking the necessary steps to ensure no more lives are lost. Together, we can turn this moment of remembrance into a movement for change.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this fabulous event, especially our Board members, Greig Fennell, Jackie Gillan, Joan Claybrook, Dr. David Diamond, and James Hope from Kia.

I am deeply grateful for Amber Rollins's countless hours and unwavering dedication to preparing for this press event and all our work at Kids and Car Safety. Your meticulous attention to detail and tireless efforts have not gone unnoticed. The event's success is a testament to your hard work and commitment. Thank you for your professionalism, expertise, and the significant contributions you make each and every day. It is always an honor to witness your dedication firsthand, and I am incredibly grateful for everything you've done.

We all must sincerely thank the mothers who joined us today for sharing your story at the press event. I cannot imagine the depth of your pain, yet you chose to speak about the loss of your child with such courage and strength. Your words profoundly impact and are essential in raising awareness about the unthinkable tragedy that happened to their family.

Your bravery in turning a personal tragedy into a powerful message of hope and change is truly inspiring. Thank you for your vulnerability and for helping to make a difference. Your voice is invaluable, and we are deeply honored by your presence and participation.

With heartfelt thanks and sympathy, we bless them mightily.