

August 2025

Protecting children from the **dangers** of heat in vehicles

Safer pathways through
childhood 2022–2027



QUEENSLAND
Family & Child
Commission



Queensland
Government

Acknowledgement

The Commission acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians across the lands, seas and skies where we walk, live and work. We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as two unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across Queensland and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

The Commission acknowledges the special rights of children which are recorded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), guided by its four key principles: devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; respect for the views of the child; and non-discrimination.

Appreciation

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Accessibility

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About this publication

This insights paper was produced as part of the Commission's child death prevention activities. This work is informed by the Queensland Child Death Register and guided by our 'Safer Pathways Through Childhood 2022-2027' framework. For more information please see our website.

This report may cause distress for some people. If you need help or support, please contact any of these services:

Lifeline – 13 11 14

Beyond Blue – 1300 224 636

Kids Helpline – 1800 551 800 (for 5–25 years of age)

13 YARN – 13 92 76 (for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people)



Two children, on average, are locked in a vehicle every day in Queensland.



75% of the temperature **rise** inside a car parked outside occurs within the first 5 minutes of closing and leaving the car.¹



The temperature in a car can **rise 10 degrees** within 10 minutes, quickly reaching dangerously high levels.²



Under average Queensland summer weather conditions, the temperature in a car can **rise** from air-conditioned to outside temperature in around 9 minutes and **reach 40 degrees** in as little as 30 minutes.³



If a child is found unattended inside a locked vehicle, **stay calm and act fast** by immediately calling emergency services on 000 and Royal Automobile Club of Queensland (RACQ) on **13 1111** for help too, even if you are not a member.

What does the data show?

Thousands of children are left or locked in vehicles worldwide every year. This emergency often requires assistance from ambulance services or automobile associations, such as RACQ.

There have been approximately 30 confirmed Australian child deaths from hot cars over the past 25 years.⁴ Incidents and fatalities involving children in cars and buses in Queensland are shown in Figure 1.

14 heat stress-related child deaths in vehicles in Queensland between 2004–2024

All children were under 4 years of age

7 children accessed the vehicle and became trapped, through:

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">> Lapse of adult supervision or no supervision> Car's child safety lock engaged | <ul style="list-style-type: none">> Child accessed an unlocked vehicle> Adult engaged in social activities or sleeping |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

7 children were left in the vehicle, intentionally or unintentionally, by a parent/caregiver or childcare/transport service, through:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">> Change in routine> Forgot to drop child to childcare centre> Intentionally left sleeping child> External distraction | <ul style="list-style-type: none">> Overwhelming parental stressors> Substance use> Staff did not follow service procedures |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

7 of the 14 children were known to the child protection system in the year prior to their death.

5 of the 14 child deaths – there is evidence that a parent/caregiver or staff member was charged following the event. Charges included manslaughter or murder with reckless indifference.

| Figure 1: Fatal and non-fatal incidents involving vehicles in Queensland

| Source: Queensland Family and Child Commission, Queensland Child Death Register, 2025 |

Incidents involving children locked in vehicles



Even though the number of children locked in vehicles is decreasing, a significant number of children are still locked in vehicles each year in Queensland.

For children locked in vehicles, a frequent scenario involves the parent handing the car keys to their child, who then accidentally locks the car while the parent is outside the vehicle.⁵



RACQ call-outs to children locked in vehicles



Source: RACQ data, 2025⁶



41 occasions where children were left on buses in the 5 years prior to 2022, resulting in regulatory changes for the safe transport of children.

Source: The Guardian, 2022⁷

How does heat cause danger in locked vehicles?

Anyone can be at risk of heat stress if left in a vehicle. Young children are particularly at risk; however, the increased risks also extend to the elderly, people with disability, and animals.

Just like a greenhouse used for growing plants, a car traps heat inside, causing temperatures to rise rapidly.

What if a car is left sitting in the sun?

Light energy heats the car body and enters through the windows and windshield where it is absorbed by the car's interior surface. The surfaces then radiate heat, warming the air inside which is unable to easily escape back out the closed windows. The heat gets trapped, and the temperature continues to rise until it becomes unbearable.

What happens to a person left in the hot car?

As the person exhales, humidity increases inside the car, making sweat less effective at cooling the body because sweat will not evaporate as quickly. Several factors, such as the person's age, weight, existing health problems and clothing, will influence how and when heat becomes fatal.⁸

Are children more sensitive to heat?

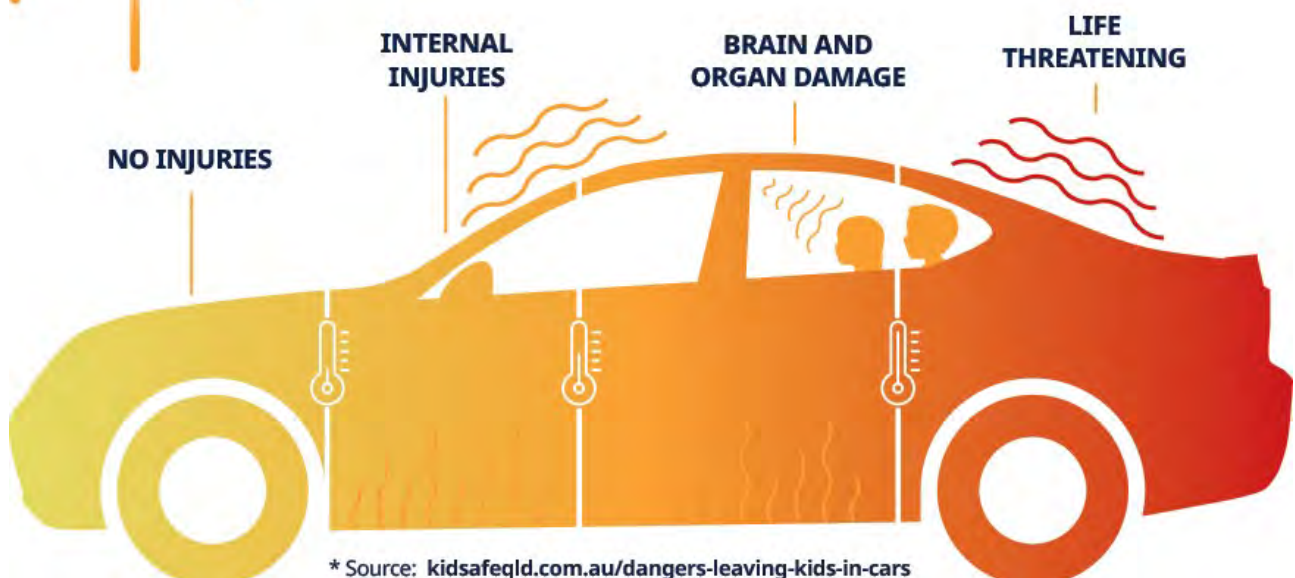
Young children are more sensitive to heat than older children or adults as their body temperature can rise **three to five times faster**, making them more sensitive to heat-related illnesses and risk of death.⁹

Hyperthermia (high body temperature) and heat-related effects happen along a continuum. Body temperature exceeding 40 degrees can lead to serious injury and death.¹⁰



Increasing temperature

According to Kidsafe*, a parked car can become 20–30°C hotter than the surrounding air, reaching temperatures of 60–70°C in minutes, with 75% of that rise occurring within the first 5 minutes.



* Source: kidsafeqld.com.au/dangers-leaving-kids-in-cars

Don't believe the myths



Mild days and cooler months: temperatures inside a car even on mild days or cooler months can **quickly become dangerous**.



Leaving the windows down slightly: tests conducted by RACQ have shown that when car windows are left open by 10cm, the inside temperature is only 5 degrees cooler than with the windows closed.



A car parked in the shade: even if parked in the shade, temperatures inside a car can **more than double** in the hotter months.



Tinted windows, a sunshade, a lighter car colour: although temperatures inside the car may initially rise at a slightly slower rate, they can **reach similar high temperatures** as a car parked in the direct sun.



Larger cars: vehicle size has **very little effect on temperatures inside** a parked car. Large cars can heat up as much as small cars.

11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

Heatstroke is an emergency



KidSafe recommends the following actions if a child is found unattended in a vehicle and there is a risk of heatstroke:





- › Signs of heat stress for a child could include, very red and hot skin, drowsiness or confusion, sunken or closed eyes, limpness, sleepiness or unconsciousness.¹⁹
- › Call **emergency services on 000** for urgent medical attention. If the child cannot be accessed inside a locked car, you can also call **RACQ on 13 1111**, even if you are not a member.
- › Remove the child from the vehicle, placing them in the shade and cool them down by removing excessive clothing, use a damp cloth or cold pack wrapped in a tea towel under arms or in groin.
- › Follow First Aid, **DRSABCD action plan** – check for **D**anger, look for a **R**esponse, **S**end for help, check **A**irway, check for **B**reathing, start **C**PR, access and attach an Automated External **D**efibrillator (AED), if available.²⁰
- › Follow the instructions from emergency services and/or RACQ.²¹
- › It may be necessary to break into a vehicle if emergency services have not arrived. Consider the safest way to break into the vehicle that will not harm or cause further stress to the child.
- › **Childcare centres** should keep a glass breaking tool in the centre, in case of an emergency.
- › Hail a bus – as they are required to carry glass breaking tools.
- › To use a glass breaking tool, place it about 10cm diagonally up from the lock or handle corner on the driver's side door, and activate. Do not hit the windscreen front or rear with a brick as it could cause glass to shatter over the child and is usually not successful in modern cars.

Why are children left in vehicles?

Research suggests that cases of children being locked in vehicles are underreported worldwide because services are not always called to assist, and comparing data between Australian and international jurisdictions to get a clearer picture of the extent of the issue is challenging due to inconsistencies in reporting and categorisation.

Nevertheless, in 2024, the United Nations (UN) Children Left in Vehicles Informal Working Group (IWG), of which Australia is a member, considered research on global events involving children left in vehicles. The typical scenarios, situational factors and age group listed by the IWG for children being left in vehicles correspond with those found in cases recorded in the Queensland Family and Child Commission Child Death Register (CDR).

Findings from the United Nations Children Left in Vehicles IWG

	<p>6 years and under was the common age for global cases involving children.</p>
	<p>The typical scenarios for children being left in vehicles are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">> Child is unknowingly left in the vehicle.> Child is knowingly left in the vehicle.> Child gained access to the vehicle.
	<p>The main factors leading to these situations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">> Stress, fatigue, distraction and change in routine leading to memory failure.> Miscommunication between caregivers or guardians.> Ignorance of risk and lack of responsibility.> Children playing in or around unlocked cars.> Drugs, alcohol and maltreatment.
	<p>The most common environmental conditions observed include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">> Risk of paediatric vehicular heatstroke is proportional to increasing ambient temperatures.> Increasing risk with increased time of exposure.> Higher direct solar radiation.> Rapid rise in internal cabin temperatures.> Higher ambient humidity.



Always lock unattended vehicles but firstly, **look before you lock.**



Common **vehicle conditions** include:

- › Parked with either locked or unlocked door status.
- › In-cabin temperatures at or above 39°C.
- › Tinted windows or privacy glass decreases visibility.



Three broad categories of **countermeasures** to help prevent children being left in vehicles:

- › Visual inspection by a person.
- › Indirect detection. For example, technology inferring the presence of a child due to the minimum time a rear door is opened in a journey.
- › Direct detection. For example, sensors that detect movement or mass in the rear seats and trigger escalation signals.²²

Compounding risk

Caring for children can be demanding, unpredictable and stressful. Circumstances can arise that increase the risk of a child becoming hidden, trapped or left unattended inside a vehicle.

Supervision

Supervision is widely recognised as crucial for child safeguarding. There is much discussion on the supervisory style that is consistently protective; however, models of supervision focus on vital factors such as the child's age and developmental stage, the supervisor's skills and ability to influence the child, and the degree of verbal or physical interaction between the child and the supervisor. Furthermore, the effectiveness of supervision depends on a range of factors such as a supervisor's use of drugs or alcohol, mental health issues or external distractions, such as multitasking. Nevertheless, active supervision of a child is an important injury prevention strategy.²³



A child can wander away from their parent/caregiver, access an unlocked vehicle at their home and quickly become hidden or trapped inside.

Alternatively, a parent/caregiver may leave a sleeping child in the vehicle not realising how quickly the vehicle can heat up.

Human memory system

Human brains are wired to fall into patterns and routines, known as motor memory. From this, habits form where an activity becomes an unconscious action, such as driving.²⁴

When needing to take on new information or change, the short-term memory is engaged – however, only about 5 to 9 items of information can be taken on at any time. Once the capacity of the short-term memory is exceeded, there is the potential for memory lapse.

Factors such as distraction, sleep deprivation and stress can interfere with short-term memory. When the short-term memory is compromised, a person completes the routine on 'auto pilot', where the long-term memory (habitual memory) of the routine takes over. A person may not remember that an item was forgotten. A 'false memory' can be created where a person believes they have completed a task when they have not.^{25, 26, 27}

A potential scenario for this situation is shown in Figure 2.

Staff of childcare/transport services responsible for the supervision of children during travel must ensure they follow their service's regulations, policies and procedures for the safe transport of children.

Forgotten Baby Syndrome

Carer normally takes older child to school before work. Change to routine. Carer is to also take younger child to childcare.

Short term memory engaged but limited capacity.

Overloaded short term memory due to poor sleep, stress, exhaustion, distraction. 'Auto pilot', long-term memory of routine takes over.

Carer dropped older child to school. Driving again. Little caregiver and child interaction.

Driving routine kicks in as an unconscious act.

Carer arrives at work.

No conscious knowledge younger child was not dropped to childcare and is still in car.

Child later found in car.

Figure 2: Psychological condition known as Forgotten Baby Syndrome (Fictional scenario depicted)

Legislation

While some actions which result in children being left unattended or becoming locked in vehicles may be the result of a conscious decision by the parent/caregiver, others are not. An incident of a child being left unattended in a vehicle will not always result in criminal charges. Legislation for leaving a child unattended varies across Australia and internationally. Distinct legal requirements, policies and procedures apply if the person responsible for the safe transport of a child is a staff member of a childcare/transport service.

In Queensland, the *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld) is the main law relating to a parent/caregiver leaving a child unattended or placing a child's health and safety at risk.

Section 286 Duty of person who has care of child

1. It is the duty of every person who has care of a child under 16 years to:
 - a. provide the necessaries of life for the child;
 - b. take the precautions that are reasonable in all the circumstances to avoid danger to the child's life, health or safety; and
 - c. take the action that is reasonable in all the circumstances to remove the child from any such danger; and he or she is held to have caused any consequences that result to the life and health of the child because of any omission to perform that duty, whether the child is helpless or not.
2. In this section—***person who has care of a child*** includes a parent, foster parent, stepparent, guardian or other adult in charge of the child, whether or not the person has lawful custody of the child.

Section 326 Endangering life of children by exposure

Any person who unlawfully abandons or exposes a child under the age of 7 years, whereby the life of such child is or is likely to be endangered, or the child's health is or is likely to be permanently injured, commits a crime.

Maximum penalty—7 years imprisonment.

Section 364 Cruelty to children under 16

1. A person who, having the lawful care or charge of a child under 16 years, causes harm to the child by any prescribed conduct that the person knew or ought reasonably to have known would be likely to cause harm to the child commits a crime.

Maximum penalty—7 years imprisonment.

2. In this section—harm, to a child, means any detrimental effect of a significant nature on the child's physical, psychological or emotional wellbeing, whether temporary or permanent.

prescribed conduct means—

- a. failing to provide the child with adequate food, clothing, medical treatment, accommodation or care when it is available to the person from his or her own resources; or
- b. failing to take all lawful steps to obtain adequate food, clothing, medical treatment, accommodation or care when it is not available to the person from his or her own resources; or
- c. deserting the child; or
- d. leaving the child without means of support.

Section 364A Leaving a child under 12 unattended

1. A person who, having the lawful care or charge of a child under 12 years, leaves the child for an unreasonable time without making reasonable provision for the supervision and care of the child during that time commits a misdemeanour.

Maximum penalty—3 years imprisonment.

2. Whether the time is unreasonable depends on all the relevant circumstances.



The *Criminal Code Act 1899* also outlines definitions, circumstances and punishment for murder (including death caused by an act done, or omission made, with reckless indifference to human life) and manslaughter.



Prevention measures

A multifaceted approach combining engineering, enforcement and education²⁸ is essential for effectively preventing children from being left unattended or becoming hidden, trapped or locked in vehicles.

Engineering – scientific solutions

Vehicle manufacturing has predominately focused on crash protection, avoidance technologies and convenience measures, such as central car locking systems, rather than prioritising child presence detection technologies.²⁹

Legal and best practice recommendations for positioning and seating of children in vehicles are vital safety measures to prevent critical injuries in road crashes.³⁰ These safety measures can; however, limit parental interaction and visibility of a child during travel, especially if the child is sleeping.³¹



Advocacy and ongoing attention should be directed towards vehicle manufacturers to prioritise child presence detection technologies as standard safety features and car restraint manufacturers to develop car restraint occupancy detection strategies to notify drivers when a car is locked with a child inside.

Evolving technological solutions

- From 2023, the Australasian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) safety programme started assessing whether vehicles have a warning system for children left in cars. If one is present, it will positively influence the vehicle's safety rating.³²
- Rear Seat Reminder systems alert drivers to check the back seat when the car is turned off and the driver's door is opened.
- Child Presence Detection use sensors and cameras to detect the presence of a child in the back seat and alert the driver with visual and auditory warnings.
- Wi-Fi Sensing technology and In-Car Motion Sensors can detect if a child is in the car and even monitor activity levels.
- Some systems can be paired with mobile apps to send alerts to the driver's phone if a child is detected in the car.³³
- Safe-Check systems require bus drivers to check the bus and deactivate an alarm once the ignition is turned off.³⁴

Time and investments are required to implement solutions and situations where older vehicles or car restraints will not be equipped with current safety features. Furthermore, encouraging parents/ care-givers to use technology is an important challenge. Devices and apps must be perceived as useful to increase take up.³⁵

Enforcement and policy

Implementing and enforcing laws that penalise parents/caregivers for leaving children unattended in vehicles can act as a strong deterrent. Additionally, existing protocols for immediate response and intervention by emergency and automobile services when a child is reported to be left in a vehicle are crucial. For childcare/transport services, regulatory measures, guidance, training and continuing messaging are essential to help ensure the safe transport of children.

Actions on enforcement measures

- › Queensland's "Look before you lock – Every single time" campaign and guidance for transport operators was launched in 2020.
- › Since 2020, updates to the Education and Care Services National Regulations include specific requirements for Early Childhood Education and Care services to have policies, procedures, risk assessment and authorisations relating to the safe transportation of children. A penalty may apply if requirements are not met.³⁶
- › Australia is actively involved in the UN Children Left in Vehicles IWG. This group is seeking to develop technical and regulatory requirements via new UN Global Technical Regulation and associated UN Regulations in line with recommendations.³⁷



Future policy and enforcement measures should consider immediate detection and response when a child is left in a vehicle.

Education

Public awareness campaigns help to educate parents and caregivers who may not fully understand the serious risks of heat entrapment in vehicles for children or prevention strategies.

Awareness and education

- ⚠ Never leave a child unattended in a vehicle.
- ⚠ Have a plan and create a routine. For example, always check the back seat or open the back door before leaving the car, even if no one is in the back seat. Have an item near you when driving to act as a visible cue to remind you that your child is in the car.³⁸
- ⚠ **Always lock unattended vehicles but firstly, look before you lock.**
- ⚠ Safe play and safe play areas. Frequently teach children the importance of not playing in or around vehicles. Have a fenced safe play area with no access to a vehicle (or pool/dam).
- ⚠ Have a safe play area that is fenced with no access to a vehicle (or pool/dam). Teach children the importance of not playing in or around vehicles.
- ⚠ Never let children play with the car keys and keep them secure and out of reach.



Public awareness campaigns need to be frequent, universal and targeted, with greater government assistance to ensure education reaches more groups, such as pre-natal classes, parenting programs, supported play groups, health and medical centres, community organisations and is a regular conversation as part of Personal Health Record ('red book') checks.

More visual reminders that include culturally specific concepts, like posters in the community, awareness days or car decals, could also help raise awareness of the risks and prevention strategies.³⁹

The Queensland Child Death Register

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (the Commission) maintains Queensland's Child Death Register in accordance with Part 3 of the *Family and Child Commission Act 2014*, under which it is required to produce an annual report on the deaths of all children in Queensland. Our annual report is available at qfcc.qld.gov.au/sector/child-death/child-death-reports-and-data

The Child Death Register was established in 2004 and currently contains records of all child deaths classified by cause of death, demographic and incident characteristics. It is a critical resource that allows the Commission to analyse trends and patterns in child mortality, including risk factors for death. We use this information to contribute to research, inform policy improvements and support community safety initiatives to help reduce the likelihood of child deaths.

More information about the Commission's child death prevention activities and research framework are available at qfcc.qld.gov.au/safer-pathways-through-childhood

Data for research and prevention activities

We work with researchers, government agencies and non-government organisations to raise community awareness and develop prevention programs and policies by identifying risk factors, trends and emerging safety hazards.

The Commission can provide detailed Queensland child death data to researchers and organisations at no cost. Email: child_death_prevention@qfcc.qld.gov.au



Young children are more sensitive to heat than older children or adults as their body temperature can rise **three to five times faster.**

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