

Helping Keep Kids Safe in and Around Cars, Trucks; Increased Awareness of Once-Freak Accidents Could Help, as Could New Technology  
By TERI SFORZA , The Orange County Register

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At least 26 children have been killed or seriously injured in Orange County since 1995 by accidents once considered freak: 24 were crushed in driveways or parking lots, often beneath SUVs or minivans driven by loved ones; and two died of heat stroke after being accidentally left inside parked cars on hot days.

"It's an unrecognized epidemic," said Janette Fennell, executive director of Kids 'N Cars, one of the few groups tracking these accidents because police and highway officials don't. "Can you imagine how those parents feel?"

Across the country, the heartache of such incidents has grown. Last year, at least 128 children died in such accidents, up 11 percent over 2002, and up 39 percent over 2001.

The true extent of the problem is unknown, because officials do not track nontraffic- related, noncrash incidents.

But that may change. A bill recently introduced in Congress -- the Cameron Gulbransen Kids and Cars Safety Act of 2003 -- would require the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to track such incidents; to test technology that would alert busy parents to dangers; and to set standards for installing new safety devices into SUVs, pickup trucks and minivans.

Small things could save lives, proponents say. These include back-bumper cameras that detect small children who have wandered behind vehicles; sensors that alert drivers exiting a car when a child is still strapped in a car seat; and power-window buttons designed so children can't inadvertently hurt themselves.

The bill, sponsored by Reps. Peter King, R-N.Y., and Jan **Schakowsky**, D-Ill., is named for Cameron Gulbransen, a 2-year-old accidentally killed when his father backed over him with the family's SUV in New York last year.

In 2003, two children died in Orange County in these kinds of accidents.

On Oct. 29, JoAnn Matsushima of Huntington Beach struck and killed her youngest son as she

backed her van out of her driveway. She didn't see Ty, 1, who had wandered out of the house through an open garage door, police said. Ty was pronounced dead on the way to Huntington Beach Hospital.

On Aug. 8, University of California, Irvine, professor Mark Warschauer forgot that his 10-month-old son, Mikey, was in a rear-facing car seat in the back seat of his car. He parked, locked the car and went to work. The temperature was 80 degrees outside; it quickly rose far higher inside the car. Three hours later, Mikey was dead.

Warschauer said he is sentenced to a lifetime of grief. He and wife Keiko Hirata called Mikey their miracle baby; they went through several in vitro fertilization procedures to have him and doted on their much-loved son.

They believe their tragedy shows that such accidents can happen to anyone.

"I torture myself again and again as to how I could do such a thing," Warschauer wrote on the Web site [4kidssake.org](http://4kidssake.org). "For the last 2 1/2 years, I had been driving the same way to work. In the last few months, I had been sometimes taking Mikey to day care in the morning, but on the average only a couple of days a week. The route to both work and day care is basically the same from my house, but at the last intersection I must turn one way instead of the other. On that day, after a change of my usual morning routine, I lost my concentration and by force of habit drove to work instead of day care. Mikey, meanwhile, had fallen asleep in the back. I got out of the car without remembering he was there, walked up to my office, and shattered all our dreams.

"I accept 100 percent of the blame for this tragic accident, but I also know there are simple techniques that might help other families avoid such tragedy," Warschauer wrote.

The law is an excellent idea, he said. "These kinds of accidents tend to fall through the cracks. We haven't even gotten a handle on how big the problem is, and that's the first step toward taking action to make things better. I think it's badly overdue."

Increased awareness can save lives, said Diane Winn, who has studied the accidents as project manager for UCI's Child Injury and Traffic Safety Research Group.

"It's important for us to know the true extent of the problem," said Winn. "It will help push the move toward getting technology allowing us to detect out-of-sight objects."

Winn's research found that an increase in back-over accidents is linked to the growing use of SUVs, minivans and light trucks as family vehicles. Such cars are involved in 40 percent to 76 percent of back-over accidents, studies have found.

The overwhelming majority of victims are younger than 4 -- children who can be lightning fast but too tiny to be seen in rear-view or side mirrors when they're behind a minivan or SUV.