

How Could Parents Forget?

It's a question that has preoccupied many here in France over the past month, and sadly made the headlines far too often. It's also one to which it's difficult to provide an answer.

Over the past four weeks there have been three separate incidents of young children or babies - being left alone in locked cars. In two of the cases, the infants died, in the third a passerby was able to intervene, break a window and save the child from probable death.

Yannis

On July 15, two-and-a-half-year-old Yannis died in the town of Pont-de-Chéruy near Lyon. The 38-year-old father was reportedly supposed to drop his son off for the day with relatives while he went to work.

Arriving at the car park just a few metres from the pharmacy where he worked, he was the witness of a road traffic accident, and his attention was apparently distracted enough for him to be able to offer the licence number of a vehicle involved, but not to remember that his son was still in the back of his own car.

It was several hours later that a passerby noticed the child alone in the car, and immediately contacted the emergency services. But it was too late for Yannis, who died of dehydration.

The outside temperature that day had been 25 degrees centigrade. Experts estimated that inside the car it had been more than 45 degrees.

Zoé

Just a week later on July 22 in the town of Saint-Marcel in the department of Saône-et-Loire, three-year-old Zoé suffered the same fate.

She died after being left alone in the vehicle at the company car park while her 38-year-old father went to work.

Every morning the father would drive his five-year-old son to the creche and then leave his daughter with a child minder.

For some reason on this particular day he forgot about Zoé.

When he returned to the car in mid afternoon he apparently still didn't realize that his daughter was in the back and drove to collect his five-year-old son from the creche. It was only when returning to the car with his son that the father realized Zoé was in the back, and he immediately drove to the emergency department. But it was already too late by then.

Third case

On Wednesday there was yet another case, but this time with a happier ending.

A two-and-a-half year old girl was left in a car on the car park of a supermarket in the town of Brézet, near Clermont-Ferrand, while her mother was doing some last-minute shopping.

She had apparently only been alone for about 20 minutes when a passerby noticed her, broke the window and alerted the emergency services. The child was dashed off to hospital for tests and her mother taken into custody and investigated for putting her daughter's life in danger. The temperature in the car was again estimated to be about 45 degrees centigrade.

A look at the wheels of French justice in each of these cases reveals some astonishing differences in the way and speed with which they have been handled by the authorities.

The father of Yannis is not being prosecuted for the moment, although the police insist that it doesn't mean the case is closed and charges could still be brought.

Zoé's father was immediately investigated for involuntary homicide, and the maximum penalty for that in France is three years imprisonment and a

€45,000 fine.

It's bad enough reading or hearing reports in the media of animals left in cars, their owners thinking perhaps that leaving the windows open for just a little air would not present any danger.

But as any animal lover will know, and even those who don't own a pet would probably realize, the temperatures inside a vehicle can rise quickly, even when it's not high summer. And the outcome is inevitable.

That it could happen once to a child is surely the saddest of news. But on the back of previous reports, for it to happen three times in quick succession!

An explanation

One prominent paediatrician, Jean-Michel Muller, president of the Association of Paediatricians of Nice Côte d'Azur, has tried to come up with some sort of explanation as to how parents could forget. He is quoted in the French press as saying that such things could happen to anybody.

"If you ask those to whom this has happened, they know that children shouldn't be left alone in the car, but at that particular moment their minds are elsewhere, they have some other problem," he says.

"It's not intentional by any means. It's like knowing that you shouldn't leave a child alone at the side of a swimming pool but in spite of that it happens.

"When it comes to leaving a child in a car these people have obviously had difficulties, or are preoccupied by other things, had other things to do during several hours and at the last moment forget that there is a child still in the car."

Whether that would be a convincing argument in a court of law would only become apparent if charges in any of the cases were brought.

But still there remains the question for many people here in France as to how parents could forget?

About the Author

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