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Leaving Kids in Cars... Thinking Differently

As it becomes warmer here in the US, we inevitably start to see the news stories about kids being left in hot cars. Let's take a bit of a different view of this terrible situation and hopefully change the way people see it, approach it, and possibly change the way people try to fix it.

I like to communicate through stories. Here at FIT, we call it "teaching by storying around¹." Often the stories we hear from the people we are interacting with are far more powerful than what we experience ourselves. I am going to attempt to both share a story (names and specific locations avoided) and also capture what I hear people say and how I see them react about this issue so that we may take a bit of a different view.

The Background

We were teaching a human and organizational performance (HOP) advocate workshop for a client. The workshop was going well, and had good participation, despite the additional challenges of a language barrier of English being a second language for many participants. The advocates were engaged and interested, and as we went through the science and into more of the practical application, there was a change in one of the participants. We had just done an exercise on understanding Performance Modes (Skill-based, Rule-Based and Knowledge-based)³ when she came to me on a break seemingly upset. She wanted to tell a story of something that had happened to her. Something in her words that "she was ashamed of and had never told anyone about, including her husband." She stated that she had punished herself EVERY DAY for the last few years for being a bad mother over this incident, and it had affected her love and her life. After we covered the Performance Modes, talked about how our minds work, and covered what errors are really related to *unintended consequences*, she felt a burden lift. She now understood what had happened and how it had happened, and while not holding herself any less accountable, at least understood it. She asked to tell the story to her team in the workshop, and we agreed it would be good to tell.

The Story

A well-respected operations manager and a mother at a facility near the equator had her second child, a little girl, and had just returned to work about 2 months earlier. On a normal workday, she would get in her car, put in her mobile phone earbud, and drive to work while she got the download about the night crew's performance while she was driving in. Her drive was about 45 minutes, and she and the night managers felt this helped her hit the ground running. Meanwhile, her partner would finish breakfast for their two children (4 and 6-months) and then take them to daycare, as he worked in town. This was their routine, the way it 'always' happened.

On this morning, the 4-year old child had a doctor's appointment, so they changed the routine a bit and the mom was to take the 6-month old over and drop her off at daycare while her husband took the 4-year old to the doctor. This was agreed upon the night before as a reasonable change to their routine that would satisfy their needs to have two kids in two places at the same time. When morning came, they were rushed as they realized that the mom's car did not have a car seat in it, and they spent some time moving her car seat from the van to mom's car, then getting the baby ready and into the car. As many people do when they are rushing, she grabbed the baby and her laptop bag then went about the task of getting the baby into the car seat and strapped in properly. But the laptop bag kept getting in the way, so she tossed it across the back seat, and finished strapping the baby in for the trip in the seat behind her.

Relieved that she had the baby all strapped in properly, she slid into the drivers' seat. She plugged in her mobile phone earbud, dialed into the morning call, started the car and pulled out of her driveway. I think you already know where she drove to that morning. It wasn't the daycare... it was the plant.

When she got to the plant, she pulled into her normal parking spot, going over the elements of the call that she needed to address that morning in her head. She reached across the console to the passenger seat where her laptop always sits. Lo and behold, her laptop wasn't there! She starts to think. "Did I leave it at home?" and "if I did, where is it?" She was mad at herself for forgetting her laptop and unconsciously glanced into the back seat, where she gets a glimpse of her laptop bag. It confuses her for an instant, and then she realizes that the laptop bag was in the back seat because *she put it there while she was strapping her child into her car seat!*

At this point in her story, she becomes emotional. But it wasn't just telling the story that made her emotional; it was the memory of what it felt like that day a few years ago. In her own words, she described that in that instant, she had become the "worst mother ever." She knew at that moment that if she hadn't inadvertently seen her laptop in the back seat, she may very well have gotten out of the car in frustration (she wasn't driving back to town for her laptop), proceeded into the plant, and never remembered that her precious daughter was strapped in the car seat behind her and sleeping. She knew that the outside temperatures there routinely reached 95°F (35°C). That means that the temperature in the car could be as high as 172°F 78°C ². She immediately drove her daughter back to town, took her to their home, stayed home with her and hugged her all day long...fighting off bouts of crying and dismay. No one – NO ONE, ever knew why she took that day off. No one – NO ONE, ever knew the story of what happened that day, she was too embarrassed and disappointed in herself to ever tell.

Her description of how she changed in an instant that day had most of us in tears. How had she become that bad of a mother? How could she not love her child that much? How could she ever look her husband in the face again after she had done this heinous act? How could she be trusted with her children? The personal flogging went on and on, got worse as time went on, and impacted her life and her marriage. She had vowed never to have any more children, and even contemplated divorce.

The Realization

The mental models we use when we do things are both known and reasonably predictable. Understanding how we move into skill-based mode (habit, not thinking using low-no conscious thoughts after successfully completing a simple task >50 times⁵) helps us understand how our minds process tasks like home-to-work and work-to-home. What we now know about System 1 and System 2 thinking³ helps us understand that we sometimes make errors, where there is no intent for the bad outcome, related to these mental models. If we don't protect against these conditions, these types of errors will continue to plague us as humans, and we will continue to have catastrophic outcomes (or in this case the potential for a catastrophic outcome).

We, as humans, so frequently jump to blame³ on these types of errors that we rarely take the time to understand the conditions under which the error may have occurred, and how those conditions could be created and/or managed. If you want to test this, ask a 'normal' mom or dad what they think about leaving kids in a hot car. You will get an earful about how they need to pay more attention, be more careful, and love their kids more. Without directly quoting someone close to me, I will say that they say things like "I would NEVER leave my kids in a hot car..." and "I love my kids too much to do that..." and "how could a mom be that stupid?" Some had gone as far as telling me, "This never used to happen when we were young..."

As Safety Professionals and HOP practitioners / advocates, we must learn to use the way the general public (and therefore our target audiences) FEEL about these things and help them see a new and different paradigm. Unless and until we create an engineered fix to this problem, then every hot season we will continue to hear about children dying in hot cars when they have been forgotten there. (Note: I am not trying to address the monster that does it on purpose, but the people who do it inadvertently) I am

in my 60s. In general, when I was growing up, cars didn't have air conditioners, so you always had the windows rolled down when it was hot outside. Between this and the lack of social and news media presence, we never knew about the problem unless it happened to someone close to us. Now that we know it, and understand the failure mechanisms associated with it, it is up to *US* to do something about it. It should always be our goal to understand what happened and how it happened so that we can either prevent it in the future or at least mitigate the consequences. Simply pointing out or highlighting 'bad behavior' will not lead to lasting positive change.

I want to thank that mother for having the courage to share her story, the knowledge to show the science-based ties to the potential bad outcome, and the desire to have others learn from her mistake.

The End of the Story

This well-respected operations manager has risen in the company to a much higher title. She went home that day, sat her husband down, told him the story, and described her shame. She framed the discussion with him in the science, not to get out of being accountable, but as a way for both of them to understand the problem and help think of ways to prevent it in the future. It has now been more than a decade, and they are still happily married. And their third child is now 6 years old.

Some Recommended Actions

- When these types of items come on the news or get posted on social media, use what you have learned as a Safety Professional or HOP practitioner / advocate to have discussions with your family and friends.
- Use this story (or find a similar story) and share it through a facilitated discussion with your leadership team. Make them use the science-based definitions to keep the discussion on track.
- Use the tools available for you and your friends who may have small children. Some of us may not be able to buy a new car that has a back-seat sensor, but there are other options, help people find them:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/hot-cars-and-kids/11-year-old-texas-boy-invents-device-prevent-hot-car-n777876>



¹ – In the early 1990s, David Armstrong wrote a book called “*Managing by Storying Around: A New Method of Leadership*” that I really liked and turned into a speaking and consulting style.

² – <https://www.carkeys.co.uk/guides/how-to-keep-your-car-cool-in-the-summer>

³ – Human Error, James Reason, Cambridge Press, 1997

⁴ – Thinking, Fast and Slow, Daniel Kahneman, Macmillan Press, 2011

⁵ – FIT Human Performance Advocate Workshop, 2019

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