

Kids and Cars Safety: Protecting Children During the Winter Months

Winter brings unique hazards when it comes to children and vehicles. Cold temperatures, snow, and reduced visibility can turn everyday routines—like warming up the car or backing out of the driveway—into dangerous situations. Each year, preventable injuries and fatalities occur when children are left unattended in or around vehicles, even during the winter months. Understanding these risks—and taking simple precautions—can help keep children safe all season long.

The Hidden Winter Risks Around Vehicles

Many caregivers associate vehicle dangers with hot weather, but winter presents serious—and often overlooked—risks:

Hypothermia in Cold Vehicles

Cars cool quickly in cold weather, even if the engine was recently running. Children lose body heat faster than adults and can develop hypothermia if left alone in a vehicle—even for a short time.

Backover and Frontover Incidents

Snowbanks, ice, and frost-covered windows reduce a driver's ability to see children playing nearby. Young children are especially vulnerable in driveways and parking areas.

Carbon Monoxide Exposure

Running vehicles in garages or near snow-blocked exhaust pipes can cause carbon monoxide (CO) to build up quickly. CO is colorless and odorless, and children are particularly susceptible to its effects.

Winter Clothing, Car Seats, and Seat Belt Safety

Bulky winter clothing, especially puffy coats and snowsuits, can interfere with how well car seats and seat belts protect children. While it may seem safer to bundle kids up in thick layers, these items can actually reduce protection in a crash.

Why Puffy Coats Are Dangerous in Car Seats

Thick coats create extra space between the child and the harness. In a crash, the padding compresses, allowing the child to move too much within the seat, potentially leading to serious injury or ejection.

Safe Car Seat Tips for Winter

- **Remove bulky coats and snowsuits before buckling your child into a car seat.**

- **Harness straps should lie flat and snug**, with no slack. You should not be able to pinch the harness at the shoulders.
- **Place the coat on backward after buckling** or use a blanket over the harness to keep your child warm.
- **Check car seat fit regularly**, especially as children grow or clothing changes with the season.
- **Never add aftermarket inserts or padding** unless they come with the car seat or are approved by the manufacturer.

Seat Belt Safety for Older Children

- Children using seat belts should **remove bulky winter coats** before buckling.
- Seat belts should fit snugly across the **upper thighs (not the stomach)** and across the **middle of the shoulder (not the neck or face)**.
- If a child needs warmth, place a coat or blanket **over the seat belt after buckling**, not underneath it.
- Children should continue using a **booster seat until the seat belt fits properly**, typically when they are at least 4 feet 9 inches tall.

Simple Steps to Keep Kids Safe Around Cars This Winter

- **Never leave a child alone in a vehicle**, even with the heat running or for a short time.
- **Walk around your vehicle before driving**, especially in snowy or icy conditions.
- **Clear snow and ice from all windows, mirrors, and cameras** to improve visibility.
- **Lock vehicles when not in use** to prevent children from climbing inside.
- **Keep keys and remote starters out of children's reach.**
- **Ensure exhaust pipes are clear of snow** to prevent carbon monoxide buildup.
- **Teach children that vehicles are not play areas**, even when parked.

A Shared Responsibility

Keeping kids safe around cars during winter requires awareness from parents, caregivers, neighbors, and community members. By sharing accurate information, especially about winter clothing and car seat safety, we can prevent serious injuries and save lives.

A few simple adjustments can make every winter trip safer for children.