

NEWS RELEASE

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DEATH OF THREE-YEAR-OLD HIGHLIGHTS LITTLE-NOTICED DUI RISK TO KIDS

ALTADENA, CA (April 27, 2009) — A rollover crash that killed a three-year-old child in Coachella late Saturday night highlights a little-noticed risk to kids — being killed or injured while being driven by a parent under the influence.

The child was reportedly riding unrestrained in his father's pickup truck when it rolled over in the single-vehicle incident. The boy was ejected from the truck and pronounced dead at the scene. The father, who was wearing his safety belt, sustained minor injuries and was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs with injury, willful child cruelty resulting in injury or death, and gross vehicular manslaughter, according to California Highway Patrol.

The pattern is all too familiar to Stephanie Tombrello, Executive Director of SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. “Almost 400 kids die on our roads each year in DUI-involved crashes, and many more are injured. Twenty-five percent of the crashes that kill children involve alcohol. The **majority** of these kids aren't placed at risk by a stranger but by the person who is supposed to be taking care of them.”

The trauma caused to kids makes Tombrello angry. “This tiny child had no say about whether or not he got in the car with an impaired driver. Too many kids are killed or injured by the actions of people who are supposed to protect them. Like most of these crashes, this one was both completely preventable and survivable. As in many cases where children die in DUI situations, the driver survived. Unfortunately, these kids are especially vulnerable because DUI drivers rarely take the time to ensure that the kids in their care are buckled up properly — even

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when a safety seat is available in the car. Without being buckled up correctly, the children’s chances in a crash are substantially reduced.”

The tragic death occurred only 25 minutes before the end of Safety Seat Checkup Week, a statewide initiative sponsored by SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. to improve children’s protection in the car. “We spent the day on Saturday helping fifty families ensure that their children were safely buckled up. Those parents wanted their children to be well protected in case of a crash. Unfortunately, not all parents are as conscientious, and children suffer as a result.”

Figures from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration show that alcohol-related traffic fatalities are at their highest rate in ten years. The majority of children killed in DUI crashes — 68% in recent years — are being driven by the DUI driver.

SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. is campaigning to reduce the number of children involved in DUI-incidents, recommending that:

- Enhanced penalties be faced by DUI drivers with children in the car.
- Child endangerment charges be filed for parents who permit kids to ride with a DUI driver.
- The media highlight this little-known risk to children, so that parents, policy makers and enforcement agencies are more aware of the severity of this risk to children.
- Civil courts empower parents to ensure that children are not put at risk by DUI parents with visitation rights and that driving with children while impaired be clearly stated as a consideration in custody or visitation decisions.
- Criminal courts address the issue of impaired driving with children in the car when sentencing DUI drivers.
- Parents educate themselves and their children about how they can protect themselves from impaired drivers.

Tombrello’s message is unequivocal. “Driving while under the influence with a child in the car, or allowing your child to be driven by an impaired driver, is child abuse. We should treat it as such.”