

Parents need to be vigilant and aware all year round

By Brock Weir

A hearing scheduled over an Aurora mother who was arrested last month after locking her two-year-old daughter in the car during a summer heat snap has been held over until August 23.

Lawyers for the accused and the Crown were in court Friday over the matter. Peter J. Ngan, the woman's lawyer, requested the delay, which was duly granted by the judge.

Speaking after the brief hearing, Mr. Ngan said the situation had been an "educational experience" for his client.

"It has been quite an educational experience and I will, on the other hand in this case, provide my client with the best defence possible and I will be talking to the Crown shortly before the next appearance and we will work something out."

Charged with child abandonment, the 42-year-old woman was arrested on June 28 after passers-by found her daughter in the locked car at a Markham plaza. A concerned bystander called York Regional Police at approximately 11.30 a.m. to 9255 Woodbine Avenue near 16th Avenue.

After the incident, Constable Blair McQuillan said in a statement that police found the child "in distress."

Officers were able to pry open a car window, unlock the door and free the child," he said, noting the mother was arrested "without incident."

While the daughter was transported to hospital as a precaution, Mr. Ngan said she is fine.

"There is the principle in the legal system of what is in the best interests of the child and what the parents say is the best interests," he said. "In this case, my client put on the sun shield to make sure the sun didn't get in and unfortunately that is not enough. Children's Aid were involved immediately the same day and made sure everything was alright."

Child abandonment, such as what happened in this case, is not a problem limited to the summer months and the summer heat, cautions Ivan Peters, Director of Services for Families for the York Region Children's Aid Society (CAS). When CAS is called to investigate issues like these, the first step is to make an assessment of the care parents and caregivers are providing their children.

"In cases where we're dealing with a lack of supervision we have to look at the circumstances in which this occurred," he says. "In the context of a child on a hot day, we're going to speak with parents as to what led to them making such a decision, if it was a decision or if it was an oversight where they forgot the child was in the car."

"Based on that assessment, we tailor what our next step is going to be. If we feel that from a parenting perspective that this was a decision that was made purely because of a lack of understanding, we want to understand what the thought was and we would tailor the education for that."

If a parent has no idea of the dangers of leaving a child locked in the car on a hot day, such as parents or caregivers new to Canada and not used to the varying Canadian climate, it would be handled differently to those who have a "cavalier attitude around the caring of children." Cases where parents fall into the second category are atypical, he says, but intervention would be gauged accordingly.

"There seems to be a little more focus this year on a lack of supervision and the context of leaving a young child in a hot car, but there are risks associated with leaving a child alone in the wintertime or when the weather isn't such a factor, and you can risk having your child abducted," says Mr. Peters. "Lack of supervision in general is what we're concerned about."