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Concept car pushes right buttons for safety

By Anita Lienert, The Detroit News

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DETROIT — To 4-year-old Matthew Lenton, the cool car parked in front of Children's Hospital of Michigan was all about fun — not safety.

"Wow," he squealed as he raced toward the sleek Volvo SCC, a "safety concept car" painted the color of an orange traffic cone and carefully designed to prove that safety doesn't have to be big, clunky or boring. "This is a Hot Wheels car!"

He scrambled into the back seat and peered up at the see-through roof.

"When Spider-Man comes, you'll be able to see him," the little boy told passersby. As Matthew prattled on about cars and super heroes, his father Kelvin listened intently as engineers described the SCCs futuristic safety features:

- A heartbeat monitor alerts parents who have left a child behind in a hot car.
- A blind-spot warning system helps the driver change lanes by blinking warning lights. Adaptive headlights turn with the car.
- See-through pillars on either side of the windshield improve better visibility.
- The driver's seat is a high-tech cocoon. A sensor mounted on the windshield locks



By Clarence Tabb Jr., GNS
Ford and Volvo have designed a new safety concept car, the Volvo SCC "safety concept car."

Safety features

- Four-point seat belts crisscross the shoulders and hold occupants snugly in place.
- See-through A-pillars and recessed B-pillars improve visibility.
- Heartbeat monitor alerts parents to left-behind child.
- Adaptive headlights cast a long, narrow beam at highway speeds, a broader beam at slower speeds, and turn with the steering wheel.
- Fixed-eye-position driver's seat automatically adjusts steering wheel, floor, pedals and center

onto the driver's pupils, like something out of a James Bond movie, and automatically swings the shifter, center console, seat, pedals and floor into a position that gives the driver the best visibility.

- There's a ceiling-mounted camera that projects the faces of kids in the rear seats onto a screen on the dashboard, so parents don't have to turn around to see what's going on when they're driving.

"These are so terrific, it makes you want to have another kid," said Kelvin Lenton, a 39-year-old investigator for Detroit.

That wasn't exactly our intent when we talked Ford Motor into parking the \$4 million hand-built concept car it jointly developed with its Swedish subsidiary in front of the busy hospital in the Detroit Medical Center. The SCC is a four-door wagon-like vehicle based on the Volvo S60 sedan.

We wanted to get the reaction of parents and Children's Hospital of Michigan safety experts to the technology that auto engineers say will slowly begin to filter into production cars in the next five to 10 years. The engineers are concerned about the public's reaction to their dream projects, too.

"Driver distraction is a big concern," said David Wagner, 44, a safety technical specialist at Ford Research Laboratory. "We have created enough sensors where we could confuse the driver all the time. Now our big question is how to give the driver information without distracting him."

Our informal, parent-on-the-street session generated lots of enthusiasm for some of the Volvo SCC's features.

Leanne Chesney, a 32-year-old mother of two from Wyandotte, Mich., was impressed with the four-point seat belts on the concept car. These X-shaped belts crisscross the body and hug the occupant in place. Federal regulations now prohibit the use of these racing-style belts in production cars, but Ford says it has applied for an exemption from the government as it improves the harness design.

Chesney strapped herself in the front seat and smiled.

"I love the fact they aren't scraping my neck like the seat belt in my Suburban does," she said. "But what happens if you're pregnant? Aren't they hitting you in the wrong spot?"

console to improve visibility.

- Blind-spot warning system is on the inside of the left side-mirror housing and flashes yellow or red warning lights and chimes to alert driver to vehicles in next lane.

- Kid-camera mounted in ceiling projects image of kids in rear seat onto instrumental panel.

- Height-adjustable, integrated rear booster seat protects 40- to 80-pound kids.

Ford safety engineers told her they were testing the belts on "pregnant" crash dummies now.

More controversial was the heartbeat monitor, a vibration sensor that's mounted to the frame of the concept car. It works only when the car's engine is turned off. Engineers are arguing over what kind of system it should use to alert the driver to trouble, such as a left-behind child or pet, or even an intruder lurking in the trunk or back seat. A handheld keypad may vibrate a silent warning or the car could toot the horn and blink the lights if it detected a heartbeat within the car.

Nancy Delaney, Children's Hospital of Michigan child passenger safety program coordinator, and Kelly Scheer, director of public relations and marketing, say every year a handful of children are brought into the emergency room here after being left in a hot car. They've seen some children die and watched grieving parents suffer. But they were not convinced by the heartbeat monitor.

"I don't think an alarm will solve the problem," Scheer said. "I don't want to create a false sense of security for parents."

Adds Delaney: "My anxiety about a heartbeat monitor is that we don't want to do anything to promote people leaving kids in cars."

Delaney was much more upbeat about the SCC's built-in, height-adjustable rear booster seat.

"We have such difficulty convincing parents to carry on with car-seat use beyond the 4-year-old stage," Delaney said. "This is a great way to convince them to keep 40- to 80-pound kids in booster seats. And the kids will be happy because they can see the road better from this perspective."

Safety specialist Wagner said Ford expects the heartbeat monitor, adaptive headlights, four-point seat belts and kid camera to be available to buyers within the next five years.

It may take a decade to get the so-called "fixed-eye-position" driver's seat, which automatically moves the floor and the center console, into production because it will require features such as brake- and throttle-by-wire, which means those pedals will be connected electronically, not mechanically, to the engine.

In the meantime, Kelvin Lenton seemed mesmerized by the kid camera projecting his son's face on the instrument panel. Lenton said he rigged up a cheap mirror underneath the rearview mirror in his 1997 Ford Escort to see Matthew better when he's in the back seat. But it's always falling off.

"It's good to see the auto companies thinking about parents," he told the

engineers. "But I can see where you missed something. I also put sunshades on the rear windows of my Escort to protect Matthew. That's something you need to think about, too."

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