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Child Passenger Safety FAQs

Q: What about airbags?

A: Children can be seriously injured or killed by the force of an inflating airbag. Rear-facing child safety seats should NEVER be used in the front seat of a vehicle with an active passenger airbag. It is recommended that no one under 13 years old ride in the front seat at all. If a child under 13 must ride in the front seat, adjust the vehicle seat back as far as possible from the airbag system.

Q: When should a child safety seat be discarded?

A: Do not use a child safety seat that has exceeded the seat expiration date, has been involved in a crash, or is missing the manufacturer's label indicating the name, model number and date of manufacture. In addition, you should never buy a used child safety seat unless you personally know that the seat has not been in a crash.

Q: How long should my child ride in the back seat?

A: Children under 13 years of age should always ride in the back seat. In fact, the back seat is generally the safest place for anyone in the most common type of car crash --- a head-on collision.

Q: My child complains that his seat belt is uncomfortable. Can I put the shoulder strap of the seat belt behind his back?

A: No! Never place the shoulder belt behind the back or under the arm. This will allow him to be thrown forward violently in a crash or cause him to "submarine" out from under the seat belt completely. When this happens, the force of the crash can cause ribs to break and the spleen and kidneys to be lacerated. If the seat belt is hitting the child on the neck, he may not be tall enough for the seat belt alone and may need a booster seat.



HOSPITALS · RESEARCH · FOUNDATION

Child Passenger Safety FAQs

Q: My child is school-age now. Do they still need a booster seat?

A: Need for a booster seat is based more on height and weight than on age. For older children, booster seats raise the seating position so that the vehicle seat belt fits properly. That is low on the hips and snug on the collarbone. Without the booster, a seat belt can ride dangerously across the stomach and neck and may cause serious injuries in a crash. Consider testing your child in the back seat of your car without a booster seat and consider the following:

1. Does my child sit all the way back against the automobile seat?
2. Do their knees bend comfortably at the edge of the vehicle seat?
3. Does the lap belt naturally rest below the belly, touching the tops of their thighs?
4. Is the shoulder belt centered between their shoulder and neck?
5. Can they stay seated like this for the whole trip?

If you answer no to any of these questions, your child still needs a booster seat.

Q: What does "convertible" seat mean?

A: Convertible simply means that the seat may be used in the rear-facing position for infants, then turned around and "converted" to the forward-facing position until the child is 40 lbs. Different seats vary, so check the manufacturer's guidelines for your seat.

Q: I can't see my baby in the back seat – is he safe?

A: Parents should not be overly concerned that the child is out of the driver's view in the back seat. If the baby has special health needs that require full-time monitoring, ask another adult to ride with the baby in the back seat. If your baby seems a little small for the seat and his body rocks from side to side, you may place tightly rolled up receiving blankets around (not under!) the head and shoulders for support.



HOSPITALS · RESEARCH · FOUNDATION

Child Passenger Safety FAQs

Q: Why should my baby ride facing the back of the vehicle?

A: An infant's neck is not yet strong enough to withstand the forces of a crash when forward-facing. Therefore, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children remain in a rear-facing car safety seat as long as possible, until they reach the highest weight or height allowed by their seat. With car seat manufacturers making car seats that rear face until the child up to 40lbs or more, this means most children can rear-face past their second birthday.

Q: My child safety seat seems to sit at an odd angle and to slide around. What can I do?

A: Vehicle seats are all a little different. They may have humps, slopes, grooves or any number of contours and shapes. While the middle of the back seat is generally the best place to install your child safety seat, a relatively flat surface is needed for the best fit. So, if the middle simply won't allow a flat and snug fit, try the passenger side area of the back seat.

Q: Is it ok for my child to wear a winter jacket or to put blankets or extra padding under the harness straps?

A: No. Blankets or heavy clothing can keep the harness straps from fitting properly. It is much better to dress the child in light clothing, place him in the seat, buckle the harness, and then cover his body with a blanket for warmth.

Q: How snug should the harness straps be around my child?

A: You should not be able to pinch a fold in the fabric of the harness straps at your child's collarbone. Remember, a child safety works best when the straps are pulled straight over the child's shoulders and adjusted to a snug fit. If your child safety seat has more than one set of slots for the harness straps, be sure to use



HOSPITALS · RESEARCH · FOUNDATION

Child Passenger Safety FAQs

the slots that are at or below the child's shoulder level for rear-facing seats, or the slots at or above your child's shoulder level (in reinforced slots) for forward-facing seats.

Q: When do I need to use a locking clip?

A: The purpose of a locking clip is to prevent the webbing of the seat belt from sliding through the latch plate, which would allow the lap portion of the belt to lengthen or loosen. Generally, a locking clip is needed when the vehicle has a lap/shoulder seat belt with an emergency locking retractor (ELR) and a sliding latch plate (usually in vehicles made prior to 1996). Read your vehicle owner's manual to learn more about your seatbelt system. If found to be needed, the locking clip should always be placed within an inch of the latch plate (the silver tongue that fits into the buckle) and the slack from the shoulder portion of the seat belt should be reeled back into the retractor.

Q: Is my child's seat tight enough in place?

A: The seat should not move more than one inch from side to side, or front to back at the belt path (slots on the seat through which the vehicle seat belt or lower anchors is guided before locking). Using the instructions that come with your child safety seat as a guide, be sure to place the seat belt through the correct belt path of your child safety seat. Then push the car seat very firmly into the vehicle seat, using as much of your body weight as possible and buckle. Next, pull the seat belt as tight as you can, feeding the shoulder portion of the belt back into the retractor. Finally, check to be sure that the seat does not move more than one inch from side to side at the belt path.



HOSPITALS · RESEARCH · FOUNDATION

Child Passenger Safety FAQs

Q: Do I need to use the child safety seat even on short trips?

A: Yes! Never hold a child in your lap, even on a short trip. Even if you are wearing a seat belt yourself, the child is still very likely to be thrown from your arms or crushed in a collision if not properly restrained. In addition, the cargo area of a pickup truck, van or station wagon is also a very dangerous place to ride. Anyone riding in the bed of a pickup truck, even if it has a camper, is at serious risk of being thrown out and seriously injured or killed. Everyone should use a seat belt at all times.

Q: May I use the lower anchors in the center position?

A: It depends on your vehicle. Check your vehicle owner's manual to see if the vehicle manufacturer allows the use of the lower anchors in the center position even though there may not be a set of anchors specifically for that position.

Q: Is it safer to use the lower anchors or the seat belt for installation?

A: Whichever system provides the tighter installation and you can use correctly each time you install the seat is preferred. One system is not necessarily safer than the other.

Q: What is LATCH?

A: LATCH stands for Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children. It is available in vehicles manufactured after September 2002. The system consists of two lower anchors and one top tether anchors. It provides an alternative way for parents to install their car seat. The lower anchor points are generally found where the seat back cushion meets the seat bottom cushion. Top tether anchors may be found in various locations depending on the vehicle. Check your vehicle owner's manuals for assistance in finding the anchor points for your vehicle.



HOSPITALS · RESEARCH · FOUNDATION

Child Passenger Safety FAQs

Q: Are the specialty items (after-market items) sold separately for child safety seats okay?

A: Any products that do not come with the child safety seat from the manufacturer are not recommended. In the event of a crash, head roll devices can release compressed air and increase body movement, shoulder strap covers can reduce the snug fit needed for best protection, and window shades or mirrors with suction cups can release and become missiles.

Q: May I use my car seat after it has been in a crash?

A: If you have been in a moderate to severe crash, then it is recommended that you replace your car seat. If you have been in a minor crash, then the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration provides the following recommendations for replacement of car seats:

Minor crashes are those that meet ALL of the following criteria:

- The vehicle was able to be driven away from the crash site;
- The vehicle door nearest the safety seat was undamaged;
- There were no injuries to any of the vehicle occupants;
- The air bags (if present) did not deploy; AND
- There is no visible damage to the safety seat

Q: What is the best seat?

A: With approximately 50 different child safety seat manufacturers and 200 different seat models, there is no single "best" seat. All seats sold in the U.S. must pass the same federally mandated safety testing. Each child safety seat fits differently in each vehicle. Not all seats can be fitted correctly in all vehicles. So, what works great in one car may not work as well in another. The best seat is the one that fits YOUR child, fits in YOUR vehicle, is easy for YOU to use correctly every time your child rides, and is a seat that YOU can afford.



HOSPITALS · RESEARCH · FOUNDATION

Child Passenger Safety FAQs

Q: Why is child passenger safety so important?

A: According to the Center for Disease Control (May 2008) motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for children under age 14. In a car crash at just 25 mph, an unrestrained child can slam into a dashboard or windshield at a force equal to a fall from a three-story building. Car seat check-up events have shown that more than 90% of children who are placed in child safety seats are improperly restrained – that's 9 out of 10 children!