

Car Seats: How to Choose One – How to Use One

The law requires that you transport your child in a car seat, beginning with baby's first ride home from the hospital, until age 4. It is then essential that a child be in a booster seat until age 8 or until he/she can sit correctly on the seat of the car – back to back, seat to seat, with the knees bent, without slouching. A car seat prevents ejection in a crash, spreads crash forces over a broader area of the body, and in the event of a crash, prevents the child from hitting hard surfaces inside the vehicle, including other passengers. This information will help you choose the right car seat and use it correctly so your baby will be protected.

Choosing a car seat

The best car seat is the one that fits your child, fits your vehicle, and is one you will use correctly – every time you use it. Don't choose a seat by how it looks. Read the instruction manual for the car seat and your vehicle carefully. These will give you suggestions as to whether this is the right seat for your child and where your baby will be safest in the car.

Every car seat should have a federal safety sticker on it. It also should have a sticker with the weight and height requirements, model number, date of manufacture, a brief description of how to install the car seat, which seat belt paths to use, and an airbag warning label. If the seat does not meet these requirements, don't purchase or use the seat. Make sure you read the labels carefully, so you don't use an "infant carrier" instead of a car seat.

We recommend against borrowing or purchasing a used car seat, but if you do, make sure you are getting it from a reliable source and that it is not older than six years. **Never use a car seat if it has been in a crash or has any loose, cracked or missing pieces.** All straps and buckles should be present and in good shape with the instructions available. Also, check the recall list to make sure the car seat is useable and no changes need to be made.

The five-point harness goes over each shoulder across each hip and between legs. All straps should be at least 1.5-inches wide; otherwise, they cannot

be fused in a car seat. The harness system should hold your child snugly and when secured, you should not be able to pinch any of the harness. Sometimes you may see a three-point harness in older seats – this harness is ineffective and not recommended for use in a vehicle.

Types of car seats

Infant car seat – is for infants weighing 5 to 22 pounds. It is used in the rear-facing position only.

Convertible car seat – is for infants weighing 5 to 40 pounds or greater. It can be used in the rear-facing position for children, then converted to a forward-facing seat for children weighing more than 20 pounds **and** 1 year of age. *The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the child remain rear-facing in a convertible seat until the child reaches the maximum weight limit for the seat in the rear-facing position, which could be 30 to 35 pounds, depending on the seat. This means some children may remain in the rear-facing position until they are near or past their second birthdays.*

3. Combination seat – is used for children beginning at about 20 to 30 pounds (depending on the seat) until 40 pounds or greater with the harness (some manufacturers have the harness option to 65 pounds). Eventually, the harness is removed and the seat can be used with a lap and shoulder belt. Reading the manufacturer's instructions will give you the weight restrictions.

Belt positioning booster seat – is for children weighing greater than 40 pounds and age 4 until they are 60 to 100 pounds, depending on the seat. Boosters need to be used until a child is about 4 feet 9 inches tall.

Boosters have no harness straps. They are used with the vehicle’s seatbelt system. A booster seat raises a child so that the seatbelt fits the child correctly. If a seatbelt doesn’t fit your child and you don’t use a booster, serious injury can result.

Boosters must be used with both a lap and shoulder seatbelt. They cannot be used with only a lap belt. If you only have lap belts in your vehicle and your child is over 40 pounds, contact a certified child passenger safety technician to look for options (see the bottom of this sheet for information about how to find a technician in your area).

Installation

- If needed, your car dealer can “retro fit” your vehicle seat belts or install a tether adapter.
- A tether strap can be used to reduce the forward motion of the car seat in a crash and lowers the chance of injury. A special adapter can be installed in your car to use the tether strap.
- Both the seatbelt system and the LATCH system are equally safe for use in your vehicle. You should decide which method is preferred by you and use that method. Be sure that you use only one system. When both systems are used at the same time on child seat, they interfere with the integrity of each other and the seat is less secure than when only one system is used.
- **Never** place the car seat in the path of an airbag. The safest place for any car seat is in the back seat of the vehicle. The center of the seat is preferred, but may not always work with the vehicle.
- When correctly installed, the car seat should not move more than 1 inch forward or backward, or from side to side at the path of the seat belt.

- If you are unable to install your car seat and prevent it from moving, you should consult with a certified child passenger safety technician. You may need to choose another brand/model of car seat.

Extra tips

- Most rear-facing infants should sit at about a 45-degree angle. “Swim noodles” may help you install the seat at the right angle. Consult a certified Child Passenger Safety Technician for more information.
- Use of a CHAD (Children Have an iDentity) sticker on your car seat is recommended to identify your child in case of a crash. You can call 866-511-9467 for additional stickers.
- No trip is too short to use the car seat, no matter how careful of a driver you may be. Most accidents occur within a few miles from home.
- Pull over to change or feed the baby. When the vehicle is moving, baby must be in the car seat.
- **Never** leave your baby alone in the car.
- Whenever you rent a car or use a taxi, call ahead to make arrangements for a car seat.
- When flying, buy an airline seat for your child so you are sure that you can use your child’s car seat. Use the car seat during the entire flight to protect your child from turbulence, as well as from a crash. For more information, call the Federal Air Safety Hotline at 800-FAA-SURE.
- Register your car seat with the manufacturer, so you can be contacted if the seat is recalled for any reason. The easiest way to do this is to send in the postcard that comes with every new car seat. To report a defect with your seat, contact the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration at 888-DASH-2-DOT (888-327-4236) or fill out a form at nhtsa.dot.gov.

Experts agree that about 90 percent of car seats are installed or used incorrectly.

We recommend that you have your car seat checked by a certified child passenger safety technician.

For answers to your questions or to locate a technician, consult:

nhtsa.dot.gov
888-DASH-2-DOT

seatcheck.org
866-SEAT-CHECK

Kenosha-Racine-Walworth
American Red Cross
262-554-9997

Brown County
Car Seat Program
920-448-6432

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