Why are car seats important?

Using a car seat, also called a child safety seat, is the best way to protect your kids when they’re in a car. Car crashes are one of the leading causes of death and injury for children. Because car seats save lives, using a car seat is the law in every U.S. state.

But keeping your child safe depends on choosing the right safety seat and using it correctly. The best car seat is the one that fits your child’s weight, size, and age, as well as your vehicle.

Here are some things to know so you can pick a seat that’s right for your child:

- Choose a seat that meets or exceeds Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 213. The seat’s label will say so.
- Learn how to install the seat and use the harness before your child’s first ride. Don’t depend on store displays to show you how to do it.
- To get help or to double-check that you’ve installed it properly, visit a child car seat inspection station, set up by the federal government across the country. You can also get help from many local health departments, public safety groups, hospitals, law enforcement agencies, and fire departments. Be sure to ask for a certified child passenger safety technician.
- Be careful about using a secondhand car seat:
  - If you know a seat was in a crash, don’t use it. It may be damaged in ways you can’t see.
  - Don’t use a seat that is missing parts or lacks a manufacture date and model number. If there’s no instruction manual available, don’t use the seat. Also, check the seat for the recommended “expiration date.”
  - If you have any doubts about a seat’s history, or if it has cracks or other signs of wear and tear, don’t use it. Car seat recalls are common. Contact the manufacturer and ask how long the seat can safely be used. If a seat has been recalled, the manufacturer might provide a replacement part or new model.
  - Be sure to fill out the product registration card so you hear about recalls right away.

Babies start out in infant-only (rear-facing) seats or convertible seats. As they grow, kids switch to forward-facing seats before moving to a booster seat. Here’s a rundown of which seat to use when.

What are the types of car seats?

Infant-only seats (Birth to 22-35 pounds)

Infant-only seats fit newborns and smaller infants best. You’ll need to buy another seat when your baby outgrows it. Infant-only seats are designed to protect babies from birth until they reach up to 35 pounds (about 16 kilograms), depending on the model.

Infant car seats should always be installed to face the rear of the car. A small child is much less likely to die or be seriously injured when in a rear-facing seat. That’s because the back of the safety seat will cradle the baby’s head, neck, and torso in a crash. At this age, a child’s neck usually isn’t strong enough to support the head in a crash.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that infants and toddlers ride in a rear-facing seat until they reach the highest weight and height limits recommended by the seat’s manufacturer. Safety experts say to do this based on a child’s size, not age. Small children can stay rear-facing until age 3 or 4.

Infant-only safety seats are convenient because they’re designed to double as carriers, chairs, or rockers when not used in the car. Many models detach right from the base, letting you leave the base installed in the car. Some can be clicked into strollers to be wheeled around. If your baby is in the infant safety seat outside of the car, never put the seat on a high surface like a kitchen counter, a dresser, or changing table.

Infant-seats are easy to use, but don’t let your baby spend too much time in one at home or at daycare. Too much time in a car seat can limit a baby’s movement and opportunities for stimulation, which are important for developing sensory and motor skills.

Should I use a convertible seat?

Convertible seats are designed to protect kids:

- from birth up to at least 40 pounds (18 kilograms) facing backward
- up to 65 pounds (30 kilograms) or even 80 pounds (36 kilograms) facing forward, depending on the model

Convertible seats are placed in different positions depending on a child’s age and size:

- They face toward the rear until a baby is ready to face forward (has reached the rear-facing weight or height limit for that seat).
- Then, they can be turned around and “converted” to a forward-facing seat.
Some car seats are known as “all-in-one” or “3-in-one” because they convert from rear-facing to front-facing to booster with the harness removed.

Convertible seats:
- are heavy and not very portable
- should be used only for travel (not outside the car)
- can be economical because you might not need to buy a separate infant-only seat
- are a good option for larger babies who outgrow their infant-only seat and still need to be rear-facing

If you use a convertible seat:
- Make sure it fits your child correctly. A small child in a large seat may not be the best option.
- Don’t use a model with a tray shield for newborns. The shield comes up too high on them. In a crash, the baby’s face could hit the tray.

**Forward-facing-only seats (20-80 pounds)**

Forward-facing car seats are designed to protect children from 20 to 80 pounds (about 10 to 36 kilograms) or more, depending on the model.

All kids who have outgrown the rear-facing height or weight limit for their car seat should use a forward-facing car seat with a full harness for as long as possible. They should only switch to a booster seat that relies on the car’s adult seat belts when they pass the height and weight limit for their forward-facing car seat.

Some cars have built-in or integrated car seats. As with other forward-facing car safety seats, built-in seats are for kids who have outgrown their rear-facing car seat. Some convert to belt-positioning booster seats. Weight and height limits will vary, so check your owner’s manual.

**What about air bags?**

When combined with safety belts, air bags protect adults and teens from serious injury during a collision. They have saved lives and prevented many serious injuries. But young children can be injured or even killed if they are riding in the front passenger seat when an air bag opens.

Air bags were designed with adults in mind. They must open with great force (up to 200 miles per hour) to protect an average-sized, 165-pound (75-kilogram) male from injury. While this force is OK for adults and bigger kids, it can be dangerous for small kids, possibly leading to head and neck injuries.

Protect your baby or toddler from air bag injury by following these rules:
- Never place a rear-facing infant seat in the front seat of a car that has a passenger-side air bag.
- Place child safety seats in the back seat.
- If you have no choice and must place a child in the front (that is, if your car is a two-seater or if the car seat will not fit in the back seat), push the passenger seat as far back as it will go.
- All kids under 13 years of age should always ride in the back seat, and in the middle of the back seat whenever possible. All passengers must have their seatbelts buckled.
- A law allows car makers to install a manual cut-off switch that temporarily disables a passenger-side air bag. As recommended by National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, if you must place a child in a booster seat in the front seat and your car has this cut-off switch, use it to disable the air bag for the entire ride. Be sure to switch the air bag back on when you remove the booster seat.

You can find more information about keeping kids safe in cars online at:
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
- Safe Kids Worldwide