

Car Seat Safety

Using a car seat (child safety seat) is the best way to protect kids when traveling by car. Every state in the United States requires that an infant or small child be restrained. And with good reason — unintentional injury is the leading cause of death in children, and most such injuries are from automobile crashes.

Child safety seats can greatly reduce the risk of a potentially fatal injury, especially for babies but also for toddlers. Yet many safety seats are used incorrectly. When choosing any car seat, following some general guidelines will help ensure a child's safety.

If you need help installing your safety seat or would like a technician to check whether you've installed it properly, the federal government has set up child car seat inspection stations across the country. Also, many local health departments, public safety groups, hospitals, law enforcement agencies, and fire departments have technicians or fitting stations to help parents. (If you go to one of these locations, be sure to ask for a certified child passenger safety technician.)

General guidelines and safety tips

- A car seat should be placed in the back seat, in a position where it fits securely. The safest car seat fits your car, fits your child and can be used correctly every time.
- Never use a car seat that's more than 6 years old or one that was in a crash (even if it looks OK, it could be structurally unsound). Avoid seats that are missing parts or aren't labeled with the manufacture date and model number.
- If you borrow or buy a used seat, contact the manufacturer for recommendations on how long the seat can safely be used and to find out if it's ever been recalled.
- Be sure to fill out the product registration card so you can be notified about any recalls.
- Any item not properly secured in the car will become a projectile in a crash. Use cargo nets, trunk space or other means to secure loose items and keep them from causing an injury.
- For seats with a harness: The car seat should not move more than 1 inch from side to side or forward and backward at the belt path.
- All harness straps should fit tightly, especially over the shoulder and thigh areas. Straps should always lie flat, never twisted. If you can pinch any harness webbing between your fingers, it's too loose.

- Be sure to readjust harness straps as your child grows. Heavy clothing (such as a puffy winter coat) should always be placed over your child **after** being harnessed in the seat. (A tip: After your child is harnessed in the seat, slip his coat on backward for warmth.) If it's cold outside, harness your baby first and then cover him with a blanket (never cover your baby's head). Never buckle a blanket under or behind the baby -- this can affect the harness's ability to restrain your child. Never use any bundling products designed for the car seat that go behind the baby or between the baby and the straps.
- While uncommon, some seatbelts may require a special locking clip designed specifically to keep the belt from loosening. Locking clips come with your car seat. Read the car seat manual for instructions on how to use it.
- Before installing your child's car seat, read the product manual completely. If you need help installing your safety seat or would like a technician to check whether you've installed it properly, visit www.safekids.org or www.nhtsa.gov to find an inspection station near you.

Types of car seats

Rear facing (birth to age 3)

- An infant seat with or without a base only goes rear facing. Never use an infant seat as a place for your baby to sleep in at home, and don't place infant seats on top of shopping carts.
- Convertible seats should be rear facing until the child weighs 30-45 lbs. You can use this type of seat from birth **or** after the child has outgrown the infant seat. Keep children rear facing until they're at least 2 years old, or until they reach the upper height and weight limits of the seat.
- Infant-only seats are usually designed with a 3-point or 5-point harness. The harness should always be placed in the slots that are at or below your baby's shoulders. The chest clip that holds the harness straps together should be placed level with your baby's armpits or at nipple level.
- Your baby's head should be at least 2 inches below the top of the safety seat when riding rear facing.
- If your baby slouches to one side in the seat (common among newborns), place rolled-up receiving blankets on each side of the shoulders. There are supports specially designed for car seats, but only use them if they came manufactured with your safety seat.

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- If your baby's head flops forward (also common with newborns), check the angle of the seat (a 30- to 45-degree angle is best). Check the seat manual to see if a rolled towel or pool noodle is allowed to be used to adjust the recline angle if needed.

Forward facing (age 2 to 6 and 20-80 pounds)

- Convertible seats (seats that go both rear and forward facing) or combination seats (seats that go forward with a harness and also convert to a booster seat) can be used with the harness until the maximum harness weight limits of the seat, preferably until age 6. A child can then be moved into a belt positioning booster seat.
- Convertible seats that have an overhead tray shield or t-shield are outdated and should not be used.
- Shoulder straps should be placed through the slots at or above a child's shoulders.
- Use the top tether strap at all times if your vehicle allows for it. Check your vehicle's manual for tethering locations for forward facing car seats.
- When your child's shoulders go above the highest harness slots or when the tops of your child's ears are taller than the top of the car seat shell, she's outgrown the car seat.

Boosters (ages 4-12)

- Children who have outgrown their 5-point harness car seat should use a belt positioning booster seat. The booster seat should position the lap belt low on the child's hips and thighs and the shoulder belt should lie flat across the shoulder and collar bone.
- A booster seat with a high back helps support a child's body when he's tired or falls asleep, making it less likely for him to fall out of the properly fitting seatbelt.
- A booster with no back is best suited for older children who are less likely to need the extra support a high back booster provides.
- Children need to be mature enough to sit still while riding in a booster seat. If moving around and leaning forward is an issue, they should continue to ride in a harness.

- Never allow a child to place the seat belt behind his back. Never allow a child to ride in a lap belt only. A lap and shoulder belt are both needed to keep the child safe in a crash.

Take the following 5-step test (for kids ages 8 and older) to determine if your child does not need a booster seat:

- Does your child sit all the way back against the auto seat?
- Do his knees bend comfortably at the edge of the auto seat?
- Does the seat belt cross the shoulder between the neck and the arm?
- Is the lap belt as low as possible, touching the thighs?
- Can your child stay seated like this for the whole trip?

If you answered no to any of the above questions, your child should remain in a booster. If all of your answers were yes, your child doesn't need a booster seat.

Seatbelt or LATCH system?

When using the Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children (LATCH) system, a tether strap secures the top of the safety seat to an anchorage point either on the rear shelf area, the rear floor or the back of the rear seat of the car, depending on the vehicle model. Lower anchors secure attachments on the bottom of the safety seat to a point located between the car's seat cushion and seat back.

You should use LATCH only in seating positions recommended by the vehicle manufacturer and car seat manufacturer. **Never use both** the seatbelt and the lower anchors of the LATCH to install a car seat. Choose whichever method secures the car seat best. You should still use the top tether when installing with the seat belt when forward facing.

Air bags and kids

Air bags present a serious danger for babies riding in rear-facing car seats. Never place a rear-facing infant seat in the front seat of a car that's equipped with a frontal passenger-side air bag. If you must place a car seat in the front seat, disable the airbag and push the passenger seat as far back as it will go.