

Car Safety Seat Checkup

Using a car safety seat correctly makes a big difference. Even the seat appropriate for your child's size may not properly protect your child in a crash unless it is used correctly. So take a minute to check to be sure.



Figure 1: Infant-only car safety seat

Does your car have air bags?

-Never place a rear-facing car safety seat in the front seat of a vehicle that has a front passenger air bag. If the air bag inflates, it will hit the back of the car safety seat, right where your baby's head is, and could cause serious injury or death.

The safest place for all children younger than 13 years to ride is in the back seat.

-If an older child must ride in the front seat, a child in a forward-facing car safety seat with a harness may be the best choice. Just be sure the vehicle seat is moved as far back from the dashboard (and the air bag) as possible.



Figure 2: Forward-facing car safety seat

Is your child facing the right way for weight, height, and age?

-All infants and toddlers should ride in a rear-facing car safety seat until they are 2 years of age or until they reach the highest weight or height allowed by their car safety seat's manufacturer.

-All children 2 years or older, or those younger than 2 years who have outgrown the rear-facing weight or height limit for their car safety seat, should use a forward-facing car safety seat with a harness for as long as possible, up to the highest weight or height allowed by their car safety seat's manufacturer.

Is the harness snug?

-Harnesses should fit snugly against your child's body. Check the car safety seat instructions on how to adjust the straps.

-The chest clip should be placed at armpit level to keep the harness straps on the shoulders.



Figure 3: Belt-positioning booster seat

Has your child outgrown the forward-facing seat?

-All children whose weight or height is above the forward-facing limit for their car safety seat should use a belt-positioning booster seat until the vehicle seat belt fits properly, typically when they have reached 4 feet 9 inches in height and are between 8 and 12 years of age.

-A seat belt fits properly when the shoulder belt crosses the middle of the chest and shoulder, the lap belt is low and snug across the thighs, and the child is tall enough so that when he sits against the vehicle seat back, his legs bend at the knees and his feet hang down.

Does the car safety seat fit correctly in your vehicle?

-Not all car safety seats fit properly in all vehicles.

-Read the section on car safety seats in the owner's manual for your car.

Is the seat belt in the right place and pulled tight?

-Route the seat belt through the correct path. Convertible seats have different belt paths for when they are used rear-facing or forward-facing (check your instructions to make sure).

-Pull the belt tight. Apply weight into the seat with your hand while tightening the seat belt or lower anchor strap. When the car safety seat is installed, be sure it does not move more than an inch side to side or toward the front of the car.

-Check the owner's manual for your car to see if you need a locking clip.

-It is best to use the tether that comes with your car safety seat to the highest weight allowed by the vehicle and car safety seat manufacturers. Check the vehicle owner's manual and car safety seat instructions for how and when to use the tether and lower anchors.

Can you use the LATCH system?

-LATCH (Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children) is an attachment system that eliminates the need to use seat belts to secure the car safety seat.

-Vehicles with the LATCH system have anchors located in the back seat. Car safety seats that come with LATCH have attachments that fasten to these anchors.

-Nearly all passenger vehicles and all car safety seats made on or after September 1, 2002, come with LATCH.

-Unless both the vehicle and the car safety seat have this system, seat belts are still needed to secure the car safety seat.

-Always follow car safety seat and vehicle manufacturer instructions, including weight limits, for lower anchors and top tether anchors. Remember, limits can vary from manufacturer to manufacturer.

Do you have the instructions for the car safety seat?

-Follow them and keep them with the car safety seat.

-Be sure to send in the registration card that comes with the car safety seat. It will be important in case the seat is recalled.

Has the car safety seat been recalled?

-You can find out by calling the manufacturer or the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Vehicle Safety Hot Line at **888/327-4236** or the **NHTSA Web site**.

-Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions for making any needed repairs to your car safety seat.

Are you using a used car safety seat?

-Do not use a car safety seat that has been in a crash, has been recalled, is too old (check with the manufacturer), has any cracks in its frame, or is missing parts.

-Make sure it has a label from the manufacturer and instructions.

-Call the car safety seat manufacturer if you have questions about the safety of your seat.

Questions

If you have questions or need help installing your car safety seat, find a certified child passenger safety (CPS) technician. A list of inspection stations—where you can go to learn how to correctly install a car safety seat—is available in English and Spanish at www.seatcheck.org or toll-free at **866/SEATCHECK** (866/732-8243). You can also get this information by calling the toll-free NHTSA Vehicle Safety Hot Line at **888/327-4236**, from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm ET, Monday through Friday.

Last Updated 6/7/2011 American Academy of Pediatrics