

## Easy steps can help keep your precious cargo safe on the road

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

**T**hanks to better automobile safety standards, education and research, the precious passengers inside your family wagon are safer than ever. But despite significant safety advances, motor vehicle crashes continue to be the leading cause of death and injury among 2-year-olds and for all Americans ages 4 to 34. Although the fatality rate has decreased, the total number of child occupant deaths remains high as the population increases and we rack up more miles than ever on the nation's highways.

The sobering statistics can make you pause, but with proper preventive measures in place, your car can be a safer form of transportation. The following tips can get you started.

Safety belts have saved thousands of lives since the federal government passed the first legislation requiring lap-and-shoulder seat belts in vehicles in 1968. Still, more than half of the 42,000 Americans killed in motor vehicle crashes each year were not wearing seat belts, and six out of 10 children who died in car crashes in 2005 were unbelted.



"If you and your family are in the car... one of the most important things you can do is make sure everyone is buckled up in age-appropriate restraints," says Jackie Gillan, vice president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety.

According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, seat belts prevented 15,700 fatalities and 350,000 severe injuries in 2005.

"You and your teenager should be wearing seat belts," Gillan says. "Children between the ages of 4 and 8 should be in booster seats, and children younger than 4 should be in an appropriate infant or child restraint."

Be a role model for your children. Studies show children are more likely to make seat belt use a lifelong habit if their parents were avid clickers.

To help, many families have a rule that the car doesn't start until everybody is buckled in. Make it your rule, too!

For many parents, handing the keys to their newly licensed 16-year-old can bring feelings of pride mixed with panic. Crashes are the leading cause of death among America's teens, accounting for more than one-third of all deaths among children ages 16 to 18. The numbers are even higher for black males ages 13 to 19, who are nearly twice as likely to die in a motor vehicle crash than males in general.

Graduated licensing laws, under which driving privileges are phased in, have reduced teens' crash rates, but not all states have such laws. So what's the most important thing parents can do to help keep their newly licensed teens safe and alive?

"Make it clear that safe driving behaviors are not just the rules of the road, but the rules of the house," says Nicole R. Nason, administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Low tire pressure is to blame for 660 fatalities and 33,000 injuries every year, but a recent survey found that only 55 percent of American drivers had checked their tire



Safety seats: A best bet for kids

**W**hile not always a favorite of antsy children, safety seats save lives. Child safety seats reduce the risk of death in passenger cars by 71 percent for infants and by 54 percent for toddlers ages 1 to 4. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the "best" safety seat is the one that fits your child's size, is correctly installed and is used properly every time you drive. Infants should always ride rear-facing until they're at least 20 pounds and 1 year old.

Once they outgrow their rear-facing seats, kids should graduate to forward-facing seats and then booster seats, which offer added protection. In fact, for kids ages 4 to 7, booster seats reduce injury risk by 59 percent compared to just safety belts. For tips on safe seat installation, visit [www.seatcheck.org](http://www.seatcheck.org).

While airbags also improve safety for adults, you should never place a child in a rear-facing car safety seat in the front seat of a car that has a passenger airbag. In fact, because of their smaller size, children younger than age 13 should always ride in the back seat, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

pressure within the past month.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that one in four cars and one in three light trucks has at least one significantly under-inflated tire.

For the best vehicle safety, Americans should check their tire pressure every month, either through a simple home tire gauge or a quick trip to the air hose while fueling up for the road at the gas station.



>> For more vehicle safety tips, visit [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov) or [www.saferoads.org](http://www.saferoads.org)



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>> For optimum safety, children younger than age 13 should always ride in the back seats of the car.