

Belt, buckle & boost: Keep your kids safe in the car

By *Teddi Nicolaus*

Choosing the right car seat and using it correctly every time your child rides in your vehicle is one of your most important responsibilities as a parent or caregiver. Car seats and booster seats can protect your precious passengers during a motor vehicle crash — a leading cause of death for children.

“It’s very important that every child rides safely in their car seat,” says Cass Herring, director of child occupant protection for Safe Kids Worldwide.

All 50 states have car seat laws, and rightly so. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, child restraints, when used correctly, can reduce the risk of dying in a crash by 71% for infants younger than 1, and by 54% for toddlers ages 1 to 4. And studies show that booster seats, when used correctly, can reduce the risk of injury to kids ages 4 to 8 in crashes by 45% when compared to the effectiveness of seat belts alone. Sadly, nearly half of all children who die in car crashes are unrestrained, according to NHTSA.

Keeping kids safely restrained is not as easy as just buying a car seat. Parents and caregivers often make mistakes when choosing and installing the correct age- and size-appropriate car seat or booster seat. It can take time to understand the proper use of child safety seats, especially for first-time parents who are often overwhelmed with the vast array of safety seats available today.

About 75% of car seats are estimated to be installed incorrectly. Many parents struggle to understand how to use all the belts and the LATCH system the right way. The LATCH system, short for Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children, was developed to make it easier to correctly install child safety seats without using seat belts. When using LATCH, the anchors and attachments take the place of seat belts.

“Car seat manufacturers do a great job of making sure that those instructions are there, but sometimes it’s hard for us to follow along,” Herring says. “Sometimes there’s technical



>> For more car seat safety information, visit www.nhtsa.gov/therightseat and www.safekids.org

language. Sometimes there are issues related to whether the car seat and the vehicle fit each other, or whether we have selected the correct car seat for our child.”

Fortunately, help is available. Many fire stations, police stations and health departments provide free car seat safety checks through a national network of certified child passenger safety technicians. Some communities even offer virtual seat checks.

Don't size up seats too fast

As kids grow, the type of car seat they use changes. Don't move them to the next type of safety seat until they have outgrown the manufacturer's size limits. To help ensure your child is as safe as possible, the American Academy of Pediatrics provides guidelines for the four stages of child passenger safety restraints.

◆ **Rear-facing:** From birth to about age 3, keep your child in a rear-facing car seat with a harness until they reach the maximum weight or height limit of their car seat. Children should

be using rear-facing seats for as long as they physically fit in them.

Never place a rear-facing car seat in the front seat. The front seat air bags can injure or kill young children in a crash.

◆ **Forward-facing:** When your child has physically outgrown their rear-facing car seat, they should be buckled in a forward-facing car seat with a harness until they reach the maximum weight or height limit of that car seat. The harness and tether limits your child's forward movement during a crash.



Keep in mind that thick or puffy coats can make it difficult to tighten the harness snugly. Remove coats before placing a child in the car seat. You can cover them with the coat or a cozy blanket after they're secured.

◆ **Booster seat:** Once children have physically outgrown their forward-facing car seat, they should be buckled in a booster seat in the back seat.

Your child should stay in a booster seat as long as they fit in it, which for some kids can be up to age 12, or until they've reached a height of about 4 feet, 9 inches.

◆ **Seat belts:** When your child outgrows their booster seat, typically at around ages 9 to 12, they can graduate to a lap-shoulder seat belt in the back seat. The lap part of the belt should lie snug across their upper thighs — never on the stomach. The shoulder belt portion should lie snug across the center of their shoulder and chest — never across the neck or face.

“Don't transition your kids to a seat belt too early,” Herring says.

Always remember to keep children in the back seat, preferably in the middle, until they are at least 13. Kids younger than that should never sit in the front seat of a car.

Going with used? Check first

With kids costing so much to raise, it's common to consider using a second-hand car seat. But before you do, be sure you know the history of the seat and can guarantee that it has never been in a crash, according to Safe Kids. You should also confirm that the seat has never been recalled and that it has not passed its expiration date. Look for the label on the seat for manufacturer information, and don't use a seat that's missing a label. And whether new or used, don't forget to register your car seat with the manufacturer online.

