

Diligent Car Seat Safety Can Keep Kids Alive



by Karen Stephens

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Almost everyday, sometimes several times a day, parents willingly expose children to the greatest risk for childhood injury and death by letting them ride in a car. Because cars are so convenient, it’s easy to forget just how dangerous they can be. In fact, car accidents, not illness or disease, pose the greatest threat to children. In one average year, 2,000 children under age 15 die and 325,000 are injured as a result of auto accidents.

I loved sitting in the passenger’s front seat of our black and white 1957 Ford — right on mom’s lap. Back then, it never occurred to anyone that I was serving as an air bag for my mom! A parent’s lap may be cozy, but it’s not safe. Use of child safety restraints is critical to child safety. Car seats and booster seats have proven to greatly reduce the risk of childhood death and the extent of injuries due to an auto accident. They keep kids from ramming headfirst into windows and from flying out onto concrete pavement amidst speeding traffic.

Yet so many drivers don’t give children the added protection of safety seats. Hurrying, trying to get chores checked off the to-do list, far too many adults believe putting kids in car seats between stops just takes too much time. There are other excuses I’ve heard. A father told our child care staff that his four year old “simply refused” to be placed in a car seat so he wasn’t going to hassle with it. To avoid temper tantrums, he routinely let his child ride in the front seat unbelted and without a car seat. He acted like she was old enough to make a mature, informed decision on her own!

From where I sit, parental helplessness like that tempts fate. A parent can delude himself that bad things only happen to other people’s kids, but it’s not true. The father’s lack of backbone set the stage for child endangerment. Giving in to a child’s resistance is easier for parents, but it leaves kids living on borrowed time. More fundamentally, how can a child feel loved if a parent doesn’t ensure their safety above all else? And if not taught when young, how will a child learn to independently practice life-saving skills as an adult, or when he or she becomes a parent?

So be firm and diligent about car seat use. Apply the safety practices listed below every time your child gets into a car. Teach teenage siblings and gram and gramps to do the same. Insist that your child care provider follow these practices if they transport your child. When you love a child, you protect them as best you can. Here are great ways to start.

Car Seat Safety Practices

- Make sure there’s a child’s car seat in any vehicle that transports your child. An adult seat belt won’t protect a child. In collisions, even at lower speeds, kids slide under or out of adult-size seat belts.
- Safety improvements occur and standards change, so never buy a car seat older than 10 years. Don’t use a car seat that was involved in an accident. Don’t buy a car seat that isn’t verifiably safe; therefore don’t buy them second-hand at garage sales.

- Read manufacturers' instructions for proper installation. Amazingly, most children over age 3 are improperly settled into their car or booster seat. So check with a knowledgeable source to see if you're installing yours correctly. Your car's manual may address installation as well.
- Shoulder and lap combination seat belts should be in any car you drive. Once a car seat is installed, make sure the harness straps are in the right place, snug and secure.
- The back seat is the safest place for children until they are over age 12. The back seat is an absolute must for kids if your car has a passenger-side air bag. Infants, up to age 1 and less than 20 pounds, should sit in car seats that actually face the back of the car.
- Match car seats with a child's size and age. Children require different sizes and types of safety seats as they grow. When considering size, account for weight as well as height.
- Infant seats are for kids 20 pounds or less and age 1 or younger.
- Toddlers and young children weighing between 20 and 40 pounds, standing less than 42" tall (approximately reached by age 4) should ride in forward-facing safety seats.
- Children between 40 and 80 pounds, standing 42" to 57" tall, (usually up to age 8) should ride in belt-positioning booster seats so they are adequately protected by the adult seat belt. Booster seats require BOTH a shoulder and lap belt.
- Children over 80 pounds, standing more than 57" tall, are safe with adult-size seat belts.

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- Once children graduate to the adult-size seat belt, don't let them move the shoulder strap behind their backs or lower it. With time, they'll get used to the shoulder strap.
- Access community resources to ensure car seat safety. Many cities offer car safety seat "installation check ups." The check up determines if your child's seat is set up properly. Local agencies may also offer a car safety seat loaner program. This allows low-income families or homes with young out of town visitors to borrow a seat for short-term use.

Resources for Car Safety Seat Selection

Auto Safety Hotline for car seat recall information: (800) 424-9393

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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