

Health Information

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT CHILD SAFETY BELTS

Always encourage parents to read the instructions for the safety seat they are thinking of purchasing as well as any they already own. There are questions that most instruction booklets do not answer, however. Here are the answers to the questions most often asked of the Academy of Pediatrics' Safe Ride Program.

1. Which Seat is the safest or best for my child?

There is no one brand that everyone agrees is the "safest" or the "best." All of the child safety seats (CSS's) made after 1/1/81 meet a strict federal safety standard (look for the label). That means they all will provide an adequate level of protection in most kinds of crashes, when used according to the directions. If you're getting a second-hand seat, see question 9.

The major questions for you to ask about any seat are:

- 1.) Will it fit into my car, in rear and front seats?
- 2.) How easy is it to:
 - a.) put the automobile safety belt around or through the device when putting the CSS into the car;
 - b.) to buckle the harness or shield system to hold the child in place;
 - c.) to adjust the harness straps to fit snugly while the seat is in the car?
- 3.) Finally, does it require a top tether strap to be installed in the car, as do many older models?

2. How can I get my child to stay in the car seat?

Is any seat escape-proof? Not completely. Some children seem to be able to get out of anything. This usually occurs during the natural stage when they are becoming more active and independent and learning to stand and manipulate things with their hands.

What can you do? If you are buying a seat, look for one with a buckle that is very hard for a child to reach. Otherwise, keep the harness system adjusted for a snug fit and use the shoulder strap retainer clip over the child's chest.

You also need to be patient and firm, letting your child know the car doesn't go unless he is in his CSS. Do not start the car until he settles down, and stop at a safe spot along the roadside if he gets out when the car is underway. Positive reinforcement is also crucial, such as small rewards for good behavior; short "training" trips to favorite spots; and dramatic play in which he buckles up a favorite doll or stuffed animal for a real or "pretend" car ride.

3. Should I put my child in the front or back seat?

The rear seat is generally the safer position for anyone, because the occupant is farther away from the point at which a frontal crash (by far the most common type) occurs.

For an infant, the ideal would be for a parent to ride in the rear seat with the baby. However, if you are traveling alone with your baby, you may prefer to have her in front to monitor her condition. A rear-facing CSS provides good protection in the front seat, especially if it rests against the dashboard. Infants (up to 18-20 pounds) should always ride facing rearward, whether in the front or back seat.

Don't worry if the top of a rear-facing CSS rests against the dashboard or the back of the front seat (when placed in the rear seat). That is actually beneficial, because the dash or seat prevents the CSS from tilting forward in a crash.

If your toddler must be placed in the front passenger seat in a forward-facing CSS, adjust the auto seat to its farthest back position, to keep her away from the dashboard.

4. When should I turn my child's seat to face forward?

Convertible CSS's can be turned around; infant-only seats should never be faced forward. Many children are comfortable and happy riding rear-facing until they are about a year old, but some parents want to change their seat position sooner. A rear-facing seat is more protective than a forward-facing one, because it spreads the force of a crash over the baby's entire back, the strongest part of his body, and cradles his head. Therefore, keep your child facing the rear as long as possible, at least to 17-18 pounds and preferably to 20 pounds, between 9 and 12 months of age. Your child must be able to sit up well alone before being turned to face forward.

What about the very large, young baby, such as a child who weighs 17 pounds at three months of age? A child of this age should be kept facing the rear, because his body has not yet developed enough to withstand the additional forces to which the shoulders, hips and neck would be subjected in the forward-facing position.

5. What do I need to know about harnesses and shields?

They have some differences that parents should be aware of. A 3-point harness attaches only at the shoulders and crotch. A 5-point harness has five attachment points for the harness, two at the shoulders, two at the hips and one at the crotch. A harness/shield system has two shoulder straps attached to a small shield across the lap, which takes the place of the hip straps, and fastens at the crotch.

The three point harness is used only for rear-facing, infant-only safety seats. This harness is intended to hold the infant in place, but not to take the full force of a head-on crash that a harness on a forward-facing seat must withstand. Therefore, this type of seat and harness should never be used facing forward.

Forward-facing seats, for children over 20 pounds, have either 5-point harnesses or harness/shield systems. Both types spread the force of a frontal crash over a broad surface of the child's body and over the strongest part of the skeleton, the hips and shoulders.

The 5-point harness/shield system each has one disadvantage.

- The straps of a 5-point harness tend to become twisted and tangled, while the harness/shield system keeps the shoulder straps in place.

- For very small babies, such as premature infants, a CSS with a harness/shield system should not be used. This is because it will not allow for as snug a fit as a 5-point harness and the infant's face or chest could possibly contact the shield.

Note that some seats with 5-point harnesses also have a swing-up padded "armrest" that is held down by the harnesses. Here the 5-point harness is the safety system that protects the child, so the armrest should never be used without it.

6. Are boosters really safe?

A booster seat provides less protection than a full-size CSS, due to the lack of side wings and shoulder harness, which protect the upper body and head. For the older child (from approximately 40 to 60-70 pounds), if a lap/shoulder belt is available, it should be used with a booster that is designed for use with a booster that is designed for use with a shoulder belt, a "belt-positioning booster" (see illustration). This provides better protection than a booster with a small shield across the lap, made for use with the lap belt. Either the belt-positioning booster seat or a shield booster is generally preferable to the lap belt alone, due to the difficulty of keeping the lap belt in the correct position on a small child (very low on the hips) during travel.

7. When should my child begin using a booster seat?

You may be tempted to move your child into a booster at 25 or 30 pounds, the minimum size specified by many booster seat instructions. This often happens if a younger child is born, or even when a toddler outgrows an infant-only safety seat. However, for the best protection, you should keep him in a full-size CSS (with a high back and shoulder straps) for as long as he fits in it, normally to 40-43 pounds and up to 40-43 inches in height (or when the ears reach the top of the headrest).

8. What if I can't afford to buy a seat?

There are many low-cost rental or purchase programs available. Check with your doctor's office, hospital or public health clinic for ones nearby.

Remember, all the seats on the market today provide a high level of protection. Purchasing a lower-cost, "economy" model of infant or convertible CSS does not mean sacrificing protection. Price differences reflect the "extras," like fancy upholstery or convenience features. However, don't substitute a less expensive booster seat for a more expensive convertible model for a child who is under 40 pounds (see question 7).

9. Are used safety seats okay?

If you decide to get a used seat, shop very carefully. To tell if a used seat is safe or unsafe, make sure that:

- 1.) it was made after 1/1/81 (a label on the seat shows the date of manufacture - if there's no label, beware);
- 2.) it has the instruction booklet or that the manufacturer can send it to you;
- 3.) all the parts are included (check in the instruction booklet) or can be obtained from the manufacturer;
- 4.) it has never been used in a crash.

If you can't satisfy these requirements, you are taking a big risk by using the seat.

10. Should I install retrofit shoulder belts in the rear seat of my car?

If you intend to keep the car for some time, the benefits for all rear seat passengers should outweigh the cost of installation. The addition of shoulder belts would allow you to use a belt-positioning booster for your 4-8 year old children, which is the best restraint method for this age group. Lap/shoulder belts also provide superior protection for older passengers.