

# **Seat belt and Car Seat Safety**

Each year hundreds of young children are killed in car crashes and thousands more are injured seriously enough to go to the emergency room. Using car safety seats and seat belts correctly is the best way to prevent this from happening to your child. This information explains how.

## **Consider these disturbing facts**

- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for children ages 5-14.
- In 1998, motor vehicle crashes took the lives of 2,000 child occupants' ages 0-15 years, and injured nearly 320,000 more.
- Every day, averages of 7 children ages 14 and under were killed and another 866 were injured in motor vehicle crashes in 1998.
- In 1998, nearly 6 out of every 10 children killed in motor vehicle crashes were unbelted. Tragically, nearly half of these children would have survived had they been properly restrained.
- When a driver is buckled, children are buckled 87% of the time. When the driver is unbuckled, children are restrained only 24% of the time.
- Child safety seat, when properly installed, reduce the risk of death by 71% for infants and 54% for toddlers an estimated 299 lives were saved by child restraint use.
- Of the children under age 5 who died in motor vehicle crashes in 1998, more than half were completely unrestrained, 34% were not in age and size appropriate safety seats, but rather were buckled in an adult seat belt.

Some of the content of our findings are found on the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration studies report & Norwood Police Department web site.

## **A Word to the Wise**

Safety belts improve your chances of surviving a crash by 60%. Most crashes occur within 25 miles of home and at speeds under 40 miles per hour. So buckle up and enjoy life!

## **Which car safety seat is the best?**

No one seat is the "best" or "safest." The "best" seat is the one that fits your child's size, is correctly installed, and is used properly every time you drive. When shopping for a car safety seat, keep the following in mind:

- Price doesn't always matter. Higher prices can mean added features that may or may not make the seat easier to use.

- When you find a seat you like, try it out. Put your child in it and adjust the harnesses and buckles. Make sure it fits in your car. Follow the instructions that came with the car safety seat.
- Keep in mind that pictures or displays of car safety seats in stores may not show them being used the right way.

### **Important safety rules**

- Always use a car safety seat, starting with your baby's first ride home from the hospital.
- Never place a child in a rear-facing car safety seat in the front seat of a vehicle that has an airbag.
- The safest place for all children to ride is in the back seat.
- Set a good example-always wear your seat belt. Help your child form a lifelong habit of buckling up.
- Remember that each car safety seat is different. Read and keep the instructions that came with your seat.
- Read the owner's manual that came with your car on how to correctly install car safety seats.

### **Rear-facing seats**

All infants should ride rear-facing until they have reached at least 1 year of age and weigh at least 20 pounds. That means that if your baby reaches 20 pounds before her first birthday, she should remain rear-facing until she turns 1 year old. There are 2 types of rear-facing seats: infant-only seats and convertible seats. Following are some important features of both.

### **Infant-only seats**

- Small and portable (sometimes come as part of a stroller system).
- Have a 3-point or 5-point harness.
- Can only be used for infants up to 20 to 22 pounds, depending on the model.
- Many come with a detachable base, which can be left in the car. The seat clicks in and out of the base, which means you don't have to install it each time you use it.
- Most have carrying handles.

### **Convertible seats**

- Bigger than infant-only seats.
- Can also be used forward-facing for older and larger children, therefore these seats can be used longer.
- Many have higher rear-facing weight limits than infant only seats. These are ideal for bigger babies.
- Have the following types of harnesses:
  - - **5-point harness** - 5 straps: 2 at the shoulders, 2 at the hips, 1 at the crotch
  - - **T-shield** - A padded t-shaped or triangle-shaped shield attached to the shoulder straps
  - - **Overhead shield** - A padded tray-like shield that swings down around the child

## **Other features to look for in rear-facing seats**

- **Harness slots.** Look for seats that come with more than one set of harness slots to give your growing baby more room. The harness should be in the slots at or below your baby's shoulders. Check the manufacturer's instructions to be sure.
- **Adjustable buckles and shields.** Many rear-facing seats have 2 or more buckle positions for growing babies. Many overhead shields can be adjusted as well.
- **Other features.** Angle indicators, built-in angle adjusters that help you get the proper recline, and head support systems are other features that are made to help you install the seat the right way.

## **Forward-facing seats**

Once your child is at least 1 year of age and is at least 20 pounds, he can ride forward-facing. However, it is best for him to ride rear-facing until he reaches the highest weight and height limits allowed by the car safety seat. There are many types of seats that can be used forward-facing, including convertible seats, forward-facing only seats, and combination forward-facing/booster seats.

As mentioned, convertible seats can be used forward-facing. However, if you have used your convertible seat rear-facing, you need to make 3 adjustments before using it forward-facing.

- 1.** Move the shoulder straps to the slots that are at or above your child's shoulders. On many convertible seats, the top harness slots must be used when the seat is in the forward-facing position. Check the instructions to be sure.
- 2.** Move the seat from the reclined to the upright position if required by the manufacturer of the seat.
- 3.** Make sure the seat belt runs through the forward-facing belt path. Built-in forward-facing or booster seats are available in some cars and vans. Weight and height limits vary. Check with your vehicle manufacturer for details about how these seats are used.

## **Booster seats**

Your child should stay in a car safety seat with a harness as long as possible and then ride in a belt-positioning booster seat. You can tell when your child is ready for a booster seat when one of the following is true:

- She reaches the top weight or height allowed for her seat.
- Her shoulders are above the harness slots.
- Her ears have reached the top of the seat.

Booster seats are designed to raise your child so that the lap/shoulder belt fits properly. This means the lap belt lies low across your child's thighs and the shoulder belt crosses the middle of your child's chest and shoulder. Correct belt fit helps protect the stomach, spine, and head from injury. Both high-backed and backless models are available. Booster seats should be used until your child can correctly fit in a lap/shoulder seat belt (see "Seat belts" below).

Some car safety seats combine the features of a forward-facing seat and a booster. These seats come with harness straps for children who weigh up to 40 to 50 pounds (depending

on the model). Once your child reaches the weight and height limits, you can use the seat as a booster by removing the harnesses and using your vehicle's lap/shoulder belts. Keep in mind that when using the harness straps, the seat can be secured with a lap/shoulder belt or a lap-only belt. However, once you remove the harness, you must use a lap/shoulder belt.

## **Seat belts**

Your child is ready to use a seat belt when the belt fits properly. This means

- The shoulder belt lies across the middle of the chest and shoulder, not the neck or throat.
- The lap belt is low and snug across the thighs, not the stomach.
- The child is tall enough to sit against the vehicle seat back with his legs bent at the knees and feet hanging down and can stay in this position comfortably throughout a trip.

Remember, seat belts are made for adults. If the seat belt does not fit your child correctly, he should stay in a booster seat until the adult seat belt fits. This is usually when the child reaches about 4' 9" in height and is between 8 to 12 years of age.

Other points to keep in mind when using seat belts include the following:

- Never tuck the shoulder belt under the child's arm or behind the back.
- If there's only a lap belt, make sure it's snug and low on the child's thighs, not across the stomach. Try to get a lap/shoulder belt installed in your car by a dealer.

## **Installing a car safety seat**

There are 2 main things to remember when installing a car safety seat.

- 1.** Your child must be buckled snugly into the seat.
- 2.** The seat must be buckled as tightly as possible into your vehicle.

Ask yourself the following questions to make sure both are done correctly. If you are not sure, check the instructions that came with your car safety seat.

### **Is the child buckled into the car safety seat correctly?**

- Are you using the correct harness slots?
- Are the harnesses snug?
- Is the plastic harness clip (if your seat comes with one) at armpit level to hold shoulder straps in place?
- Do the harness straps lie flat?
- Is your baby dressed in clothes that allow the straps to go between the legs? It's OK to adjust the straps to allow for thicker clothes, but make sure that the harness still holds the child snugly.
- Is anything under your baby? Tuck blankets around your baby after adjusting the harness straps snugly. Never place them under your baby.
- Is your child slouching down or to the side? If so, pad the sides of the seat and between the crotch with rolled up diapers or blankets.

## **Is the car safety seat buckled into the vehicle correctly?**

- Is the car safety seat facing the right direction for your child's age and weight?
- Is the seat belt routed through the correct belt path?
- Is the seat belt buckled tight? If you can move the seat more than an inch side to side or toward the front of the car, it's not tight enough.
- Is your rear-facing seat reclined enough? Your infant's head should not flop forward. If it does, tilt the car safety seat back a little. Your car safety seat may have a built-in recline adjuster for this purpose. If not, wedge firm padding, such as a rolled towel, under the base.
- Do you need a locking clip? They come with all new car safety seats. If the seat belts in your car move freely even when buckled, you need a locking clip. If you're not sure, check the manual that came with your car.
- Some lap belts need a special heavy-duty locking clip. These are only available from the vehicle manufacturer. Check the manual that came with your car for more information.

## **Car safety tips**

- Never hold a child on your lap while riding in either the front or back seat. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions for correct installation.
- The center rear seat is the safest place in the car.
- Remember: Infants face backwards. Toddlers face forward.
- Always use the car's seat belt to anchor the care seat to the car.
- Set a good example by wearing your seat belt every time you travel. All drivers and front seat passengers must wear a seat belt in New Jersey. It's the law.
- Studies show that when children are buckled up correctly, they are less likely to be injured during a crash.
- Put your child in a car seat every time you travel -- even on short trips.
- Never use a car seat that has been in a crash. Obtain a new car seat.
- Use only federally approved car seats that are less than 10 years old.

Keep in mind that there are products on the market that claim to make seat belts fit better. These devices attach to the seat belt but are not a part of the original belt. These products may actually interfere with proper lap and shoulder belt fit by causing the lap belt to ride too high on the stomach and making the shoulder belt too loose. Until NHTSA develops safety standards for these products, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends they not be used.

## **Car safety seats and shopping carts**

Many infant-only car safety seats lock into shopping carts, and many stores have shopping carts with built-in infant seats. This may seem safe, but your baby could tip over or fall out of the cart. Thousands of children are hurt every year from falling from shopping carts or from the carts tipping over. Instead of placing your baby's car safety seat on the cart, consider using a stroller, backpack, or frontpack while shopping with your baby.

## **Don't leave your child unattended in a car safety seat**

Children should never be left alone in a car whether they are in their car safety seats or not. Any of the following can happen when a child is left alone in a vehicle:

- Temperatures can reach deadly levels in minutes, and the child can die of heat stroke.
- He can be strangled by power windows, sunroofs, or accessories.
- He can be taken during a car theft or kidnapped from the vehicle.
- He can knock the vehicle into gear, setting it in motion.

Don't leave your baby unattended in a car safety seat outside of the vehicle either. When your baby falls asleep in his car safety seat, it can be tempting to bring him inside and leave him alone in the seat, but this can be unsafe. Your baby can fall out of the carrier, or the carrier can fall over. And remember that placing the car safety seat on a shopping cart is unsafe too. The best place for your baby to sleep is on his back in a safe crib.

## **The W.H.A.L.E (We Have A Little Emergency) Kits**

The W.H.A.L.E (We Have A Little Emergency) kits provide emergency health information for your child when you can't. Designed to aid rescue personnel in the event of an automobile accident that incapacitates the adult driver and passengers, the kit includes an emergency label for the back of a car seat, and W.H.A.L.E. stickers for the rear windows of your car.

The stickers alert rescue workers to the availability of additional information, and the label lists:

1. The child's name and address
2. Contact information for the next of kin
3. Any important medical data

The label is placed on the back of the child car safety seat. In the event of an automobile accident that incapacitates the adult driver and passengers, the time it takes rescue personnel to discover important health information for your child can mean the difference between life and death. Why leave it to chance when there is such an easy method to protect your child?

### **Each W.H.A.L.E pack includes**

1. One W.H.A.L.E Program Brochure with instructions for parents or guardians
2. One Car Seat Informational Label
3. Two Car Seat W.H.A.L.E Stickers
4. Two Vehicle Window Stickers

The **W.H.A.L.E.** Logo and the Blue Check Mark Are Nationally Recognized by Law Enforcement, Fire, and Other Emergency Personnel. To get your **W.H.A.L.E.** kit go to [www.caases.org](http://www.caases.org). (Each child should have his/her own W.H.A.L.E. kit)

## **A message from your little person**

Hey, I'm just a little person. I don't know my name, address, phone number or how to reach any of my relatives. Please help assist me by adding W.H.A.L.E. stickers to my child safety seat. In the event of an accident, the emergency personnel will have my name and knowledge of how to reach someone who really knows my special needs! Thanks again for loving and caring about me.

### **Who & Why the W.H.A.L.E. Program started?**

The W.H.A.L.E. Program is an identification and information package for child car safety seats created by Connie Day, a caregiver from Richmond, VA, who wondered what would happen to the children in her care in the event of an automobile accident. The first program of its kind in the United States, W.H.A.L.E. is currently used in 32 states. It requires the use of four self-adhesive stickers and one informational label:

One informational label attached to the rear of the car seat provides important information about that child in the seat, such as name, date of birth, medical history, and who to contact in case of an emergency. Place a photo of your child in the space provided, and update as the child grows. If placed on the back of the seat, this label and photo will not be visible from the outside of the vehicle, thus ensuring the privacy of these personal facts. Do not use a pen with ink that will smudge, such as a felt tip or roller ball pen.

Two W.H.A.L.E. Car Seat Stickers, attached to the sides of the safety seat, and two W.H.A.L.E. Vehicle Stickers, attached to the rear side windows of the vehicle, depict the W.H.A.L.E. logo and alert rescuers that the vehicle occupants participate in the program.