

# Car Safety Seat Check-up

Using a car safety seat correctly makes a big difference. Even the “safest” seat may not protect your child in a crash unless it is used correctly. So take a minute to check to be sure.

## ►► Does your car have air bags?

- *Never* place a rear-facing car safety seat in the front seat of a vehicle that has a front passenger air bag. If the air bag inflates, it will hit the back of the car safety seat, right where your baby’s head is, and could cause serious injury or death.
- The safest place for all children to ride is in the back seat.
- If an older child *must* ride in the front seat, a child in a forward-facing car safety seat with a harness may be the best choice. Just be sure the vehicle seat is moved as far back from the dashboard (and the air bag) as possible.



Fig 1 Infant-only car safety seat

## ►► Is your child facing the right way for weight, height, and age?

- Infants should ride facing the back of the car until they have reached at least 1 year of age *and* weigh at least 20 pounds (Fig 1).
- A child who weighs 20 pounds or exceeds the height limit for the car safety seat before she reaches 1 year of age should continue to ride rear-facing in a seat with higher weight and height limits. It is best to ride rear-facing as long as possible.
- A child who weighs more than 20 pounds *and* is older than 1 year may face forward (Fig 2).
- Once your child faces forward, she should use a car safety seat with a full harness until she reaches the top weight or height allowed by the seat.



Fig 2 Forward-facing car safety seat

## ►► Is the harness snug?

- Harnesses should fit snugly against your child’s body. Check the car safety seat instructions on how to adjust the straps.
- The chest clip should be placed at armpit level (Fig 2) to keep the harness straps on the shoulders.

## ►► Has your child outgrown the forward-facing seat?

- Use a belt-positioning booster seat until your child is big enough for the seat belt to fit properly. A belt-positioning booster seat is used with a lap and shoulder belt (Fig 3).
- A seat belt fits properly when the seat belt crosses the chest and shoulder, the lap belt is low and snug across the thighs, and the child is tall enough so that when he sits against the vehicle seat back, his legs bend at the knees and his feet hang down.



Fig 3 Belt-positioning booster seat

## ► Does the car safety seat fit correctly in your vehicle?

- Not all car safety seats fit in all vehicles.
- When the car safety seat is installed, be sure it does not move side-to-side or toward the front of the car.
- Read the section on car safety seats in the owner's manual for your car.

## ► Is the seat belt in the right place and pulled tight?

- Route the seat belt through the correct path. Convertible seats have different belt paths for rear-facing and forward-facing (check your instructions to make sure).
- Pull the belt *tight*. Kneel in the seat to press it down and get out all the slack.
- Check the owner's manual for your car to see if you need a locking clip. Check the car safety seat instructions to see if you need a tether to keep the car safety seat secure.

## ► Can you use the LATCH system?

- LATCH (Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children) is an attachment system that eliminates the need to use seat belts to secure the car safety seat.
- Vehicles with the LATCH system have anchors located in the back seat. Car safety seats that come with LATCH have attachments that fasten to these anchors.
- Nearly all passenger vehicles and all car safety seats made on or after September 1, 2002, come with LATCH.
- Unless both the vehicle and the car safety seat have this system, seat belts are still needed to secure the car safety seat.

## ► Do you have the instructions for the car safety seat?

- Follow them and keep them with the car safety seat.
- Be sure to send in the registration card that comes with the car safety seat. It will be important in case the seat is recalled.

## ► Has the car safety seat been recalled?

- You can find out by calling the manufacturer or by contacting the Auto Safety Hot Line at 888/DASH-2-DOT (888/327-4236) or the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) at [www-odi.nhtsa.dot.gov/cars/problems/recalls/childseat.cfm](http://www-odi.nhtsa.dot.gov/cars/problems/recalls/childseat.cfm).
- Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions for making any needed repairs to your car safety seat.

## ► Are you using a used car safety seat?

- Do not use a car safety seat that has been in a crash, has been recalled, is too old (check with the manufacturer), has any cracks in its frame, or is missing parts.
- Make sure it has a label from the manufacturer and instructions.
- Call the car safety seat manufacturer if you have questions about the safety of your seat.

## Questions?

If you have questions or need help installing your car safety seat, find a certified Child Passenger Safety (CPS) Technician. A list of certified CPS Technicians is available by state or ZIP code on the NHTSA Web site at [www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/childps/contacts](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/childps/contacts). A list of inspection stations—where you can go to learn how to correctly install a car safety seat—is available in English and Spanish at [www.seatcheck.org](http://www.seatcheck.org) or toll-free at 866/SEAT-CHECK (866/732-8243). You can also get this information by calling the toll-free NHTSA Auto Safety Hot Line at 888/DASH-2-DOT (888/327-4236), from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm ET, Monday through Friday.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) offers more information in the brochure *Car Safety Seats: A Guide for Families*. Ask your pediatrician about this publication or visit the AAP Web site at [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org).

Although the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is not a testing or standard-setting organization, this guide sets forth AAP recommendations based on the peer-reviewed literature available at the time of its publication and sets forth some of the factors that parents should consider before selecting and using a car safety seat.

Please note: Listing of resources does not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP is not responsible for the content of the resources mentioned in this publication. Phone numbers and Web site addresses are as current as possible, but may change at any time.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

Illustrations by Wendy Wray.

From your doctor

