Selecting the Right Car Seat

Stages of Car Seat Use

The SAFEST car seat for your child is the one that...

**Fits your child**
Children are safest when they stay in each of the stages below for as long as possible, riding in a car seat that fits them. Make sure your child is within the car seat weight and height guidelines. Check labels and instructions.

**Fits your car**
Make sure the car seat fits correctly in your car. Not every car seat can be installed correctly in every car. If you need help, go to a local car seat checkup station (see Resources).

**Is easy for YOU to use**
Find a car seat that is easy for you to use the right way every time. The easier it is for you to use, the more likely you will use it correctly, so your child rides safely every time you travel.

**Crash Testing and Ratings**
Every kind of child car safety seat (car seat) sold in the United States or Canada is required by law to pass tough crash tests. These tests show what would happen if a car was driven into a brick wall at high speed. This is a much more serious kind of crash than most people will ever be in. Car seats that pass these tests are safe to use.

Most car seat makers do more testing than required. They do these tougher crash tests to make sure their car seats are safe.

There are also several rating programs for car seats, such as Consumer Reports, BabyGearLab, IIHS fit ratings, and the NHTSA Ease-of-Use Ratings. Most reviews are based on how easy the testers think the car seats are to use, but some also do crash testing.

Rating programs can be helpful. Be aware, though, that a "best pick" may not be the best car seat to fit your child and your car. No car seat can be best for every family situation. Pick the car seat that works well for your child.

See page 2 for more information on choosing a car seat.

**Stage 1: Ride Rear Facing**
...from birth until baby meets the rear-facing size limit (about 24 months). Look for:

- **Rear-facing-only car seat (shown):** Use rear facing up to 22 to 40 pounds; small and easy to carry.
- **Convertible car seat:** Use rear facing up to 30 to 50 pounds; large, stays in car; can be used forward facing when baby is too heavy or tall to be rear facing.

**Stage 2: Ride Forward Facing in a Harness**
...when over 24 months (at least over age 1 AND over 20 pounds), and as long as the harness fits by height and weight. Look for:

- **Convertible, forward-facing-only, built-in car seat, or vest:** These fit up to at least 40 pounds; most can be used for children up to 65 to 80 pounds.
- **Combination seat:** Use with the harness up to 40 to 90 pounds; can be used without the harness as a booster seat when the child is older and larger.

**Stage 3: Ride in a Booster Seat**
...when the child has outgrown a harness but does not yet fit a seat belt (see below); likely to be up to 10 to 12 years old. Look for one that goes to at least 100 pounds. One without a back is okay if the car has head restraints and the child does not nap while riding. One with a high back (shown) might protect better in side crashes.

A booster must be used with a lap-shoulder belt. If the car has only lap belts, don’t use a booster. Instead, find a car seat with a harness that fits the child (see Resources). A car seat is also better for a child who can’t sit still in a booster.

**Stage 4: Ride in a Lap-Shoulder Belt**
...when the belt fits well, usually when 10 to 12 years old. To check belt fit, use the 5-Step Test (see Resources).
Car Seat Features to Look For

- **Good size limits:** Check labels and instructions for height and weight limits that allow your child to use the car seat for a long time.
  - **For preemies and tiny babies:** A rear-facing car seat that can be used for babies under 5 pounds.
  - **For growing babies:** A car seat that can be used rear facing to at least 30 pounds.
  - **For preschoolers:** A convertible or forward-facing-only car seat that can be used to 50 or more pounds and over 45 inches.
  - **For young school-age children:** A booster that can be used to at least 100 pounds and up to 57 inches.

- **A 5-point harness:** This type has straps over the shoulders, hips, and between the legs. Avoid car seats with a 3-point harness that have a shield or tray. These are no longer made, and any that exist are too old to use.

- **Harness buckle:** It should be easy to buckle and unbuckle. Buckle buttons are required to be stiff enough so kids cannot unbuckle them. Caregivers, especially those with arthritis, should find one that is not painful to buckle and unbuckle.

- **Harness adjuster:** A harness that snugs by pulling a strap at the front of the car seat is usually easier to use than one that adjusts on the harness or at the back of the car seat.

- **Chest clip:** Check that this clip on the harness is easy to open and close.

- **Belt path:** The opening for the seat belt or LATCH strap should be easy to fit a hand through. Padding that can be lifted to access the belt path from the front is helpful.

- **Seat belt lock-off:** Some car seats have a part that locks onto the car’s seat belt. Check the instructions and make sure the part is easy to use.

- **LATCH connectors:** Check your car manual to see if your car has LATCH. If it does, look for car seats with connectors that are easy for you to use. Many people find connectors that push on and release with a push-button are the easiest.

- **Recline guides:** They should be easy to see and read. These are most common on rear-facing car seats.

- **Angle adjuster foot:** Some bases for rear-facing-only car seats can be reclined, as needed, using an adjuster foot. For others, you may need to place a rolled towel or foam roll under the front of the car seat.

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### Parts of a car seat:
1. Harness (5-point) slots
2. Chest clip
3. Buckle
4. Buckle strap
5. Harness adjuster
6. Shoulder harness slots
7. Label(s)
8. Recline guide
9. Belt path
10. Angle adjuster foot
11. Lower anchor strap(s) (detail shows connectors)
12. Base (rear-facing-only car seats)
13. Shell/carrier

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### Try Before You Buy
It is best if you can take the car seat to your car and install it before buying it. **Always** follow the instructions for the car seat and for the car. Make sure the car seat can be installed tightly. To check this, hold the car seat at the belt path and pull side to side and forward. It should not move more than one inch.

### Check a Second-Hand Car Seat Carefully
Whenever possible, use a new car seat. They are often safer and easier to use. If you do use a second-hand car seat, check it for problems. Make sure it has all its parts and instructions. Check if it has recalls. Any car seat that has been in a crash should not be used again. And don’t use a car seat after its “do not use” date—many should not be used more than 6 years. If you are unsure about any of this, it is not a good car seat for your child!

### Don't Rush to the Next Stage
Moving too soon to the next stage is a very common mistake. Keep your child in each stage listed on page 1 as long as possible. Don't move to the next stage until your child has grown too tall or heavy to continue riding in his current stage.

### Resources
- **National Vehicle Safety Hotline:** Car seat information, recalls, ratings: 888-327-4236, 800-424-9153(tty), www.safercar.gov
- **SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.:** 5-Step Seat Belt Fit Test, recall list, handouts: 800-745-7233, www.carseat.org
- **Find a Child Passenger Safety Checkup Location:** 866-732-8243, www.seatcheck.org
- **The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia:** www.chop.edu/carseat
- **American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP):** www.healthychildren.org

(See AAP's product listing to find car seats with high weight limits.)
✔ Check Your Child’s Car Seat!  
Choosing and Using Car Seats Correctly

Is your child using the right car seat?

STAGE 1: Riding rear facing—the safest way for a baby or toddler to ride.

Child's first year: Rear-facing-only car seats (A) are small and easy to carry. Make sure the baby's head is at least an inch below the top of the car seat.

Convertible car seats face the rear for babies up to 30 to 50 pounds (B) (check label), then can be changed to face forward. (C, below).

Child's second year: Continue facing the rear until the child is at the car seat's rear-facing weight limit or the child's head is an inch below the top of the car seat. Many children ride in a convertible car seat to face the rear after about age one.

STAGE 2: Riding forward facing with a harness (C, D)—Use when a car seat that faces the rear is outgrown. May be a convertible car seat, combination car seat (forward-facing seat/booster), built-in car seat, or vest.

STAGE 3: Riding in a booster seat with a lap-shoulder belt (E)—for school-aged children who have outgrown a harness. Children need a booster until the seat belts fit correctly, usually between ages 10 to 12. Always use a lap-shoulder belt with a booster, never a lap-only belt.

If the car has only lap-only belts, use a vest or car seat with a harness weight limit that fits larger children.

Is the car seat second-hand?

Avoid second-hand car seats. If one is used, check it carefully. Make sure it is not recalled and has all parts and instructions. Make sure it has not been in a crash. Don't use a car seat after its "do not use" date—many may not be used longer than 6 years. If you are not sure it's safe, don't use it.

Does your child ride in back?

The back seat is much safer than the front. Children under 13 might be big and tall, but their bodies are still different from adults. They should ride in the back.

Air bag safety: Never put a child in a rear-facing car seat in front with an air bag. The force of the air bag can kill any child sitting too close to it. If a truck or car has an air bag on-off switch, turn it off if a child must ride in the front seat.

Are you following the instructions?

Always follow instructions for your child’s car seat.

Also read the sections on seat belts, LATCH, air bags, and car seats in any car you will use.

Is the car seat tightly installed?

Car seats can be installed with either a seat belt or LATCH. Use whichever gives the tightest fit. Do not use both, unless the car seat and car instructions say it's okay. Check car seat labels for weight limits for using LATCH.

Put the seat belt or LATCH strap through the correct path on the car seat (check labels).

If using LATCH, connect the car seat hooks to the correct anchor bars in the car. Check the car manual.

Attach the tether strap on forward-facing car seats.

Tighten the seat belt or LATCH. A car seat should move less than 1 inch if pushed while holding it near the belt/LATCH.

Are the harness straps the right height? Are they snug on your child?

When rear facing, shoulder straps should be as close as possible to the child's shoulders or below.

When forward facing, straps must be at or above the shoulders. (Check instructions; some say to use top slots.)

Make harness straps snug, so you cannot pinch any slack.

Make sure straps are flat, not twisted.

Put the chest clip at the arm pit level.

Resources

Make Every Ride A Safe Ride
A Tether Is Always Better!
Tethering Your Child’s Forward-Facing Car Seat

A tether adds extra protection

In a crash, a tether holds the top of a forward-facing car seat back (see pictures B and C at right). This helps prevent serious head and neck injuries and can make a big difference in a crash. To protect well, a tether must be hooked to the correct anchor in the car and tightened, as described in the car seat instructions.

What is a top tether?

A top tether (also called “tether strap”) connects the top of a forward-facing child safety seat (car seat) to the car. Forward-facing car seats with harnesses sold in the U.S. and Canada come with a tether. Tethers also are used with safety vests and harness-only restraints.

A top tether attaches to a tether anchor in the car. In most cars since 2000, at least three seating positions have a tether anchor. Most older cars do not have tether anchors, but do have places where one could be added using a kit.

A tether is also part of the system called LATCH (Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children). LATCH connects a car seat to the car without using a seat belt (A). Almost all cars and car seats made since September 2002 have LATCH. Many 2001-2002 car models also have LATCH. (See your car manual.)

When should I tether a forward-facing car seat?

Attach and tighten the top tether whenever possible. Check the seat instructions and the car manual for directions and possible weight limits (see page 2). If the car does not have an anchor, ask a car dealer if one can be added to your car. If a forward-facing car seat does not have a tether, it’s too old and should be replaced.

If you cannot use a tether in your vehicle, be sure that the car seat is installed tightly with a seat belt.

Can I use a tether for a rear-facing car seat?

A few car seats have a tether that can be used when the car seat is rear facing. This can help keep the car seat more stable. Use a tether for a car seat facing the rear only if the instructions say it is okay. ALWAYS follow the car seat instructions.

What if my car seat does not have a tether?

If your child’s forward-facing car seat does not have a tether, check the label for the date it was made. Car seats made before tethers were added are too old to use now and should be destroyed and replaced. Do not try to make your own tether! Get a newer seat that has a tether and other newer safety features.

If your car seat is not old, but the tether is lost or damaged, contact the car seat maker to see if you can order a new tether.

A tether system has two parts

1) On car seats: A strap with a hook and an adjuster (see picture below). A tether comes with car seats that can be used facing forward.

2) In cars: An anchor—a bracket with a hole for the tether hook. (A few anchors are made of wire or webbing loops.) Some anchors are marked with a symbol (see page 2). In newer cars, the tether anchor is installed at the factory. For an older car, an add-on anchor kit might be available. Some dealers offer free installation.

Make Every Ride A Safe Ride

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C3 Revised 1/16
Does my vehicle have tether anchors?
Almost all 2001 and newer cars, trucks, vans, and SUVs have at least three seating positions with tether anchors. (Convertible cars are not required to have tether anchors.) Check the car owner’s manual. (Look under Top Tether or Child Restraints.) Look in your car for the symbol shown at right.

Common places to find a tether anchor
- **Sedan**: On the shelf behind the back seat (D).
- **Station wagon or hatchback**: In the cargo area (E), on the back of the seat, or above or below the rear door.
- **Van or SUV**: On the back or bottom of the seat or in the floor of the cargo area. (Rarely, a seat belt in the row behind may be used as an anchor in older cars.)
- **Pickup truck**: Usually behind the seatback or on the back wall of the cab.
   
   All anchors do not look the same, so check the owner’s manual. They may be bars, brackets, rings, or webbing loops. Many anchors are under plastic covers and might be marked with the tether anchor symbol (above). **WARNING!** Some cargo tie-down rings look like tether anchors, but are NOT strong enough. Do not use a cargo tie-down ring unless the car manual says that it can be used as a tether anchor.

Installing a tether anchor kit in an older car
Anchor kits are available from car dealers for many older cars. Follow the instructions in your car owner's manual or in the anchor kit. Most cars have at least two places for anchors. Some makers offer free installation (see right). The parts department may not know about tether anchor kits. They usually can find information in service manuals and dealers' parts catalogs.

For more help, find a local child passenger safety checkup location. (See Resources.)

Tether use on car seats for heavier children
There are many reasons to use any of the many available car seat models with a harness that can fit children up to 50 to 90 pounds, including:
- The child is over 40 pounds, but too short or too active to sit in a booster.
- Only lap belts are in the back seat, making booster seat use impossible.
- The child has a special need for the support of a harness.
- The parent prefers to continue use of a harness over moving to a booster.

Tethering adds extra protection for these children. However, check to see if there are tether weight limits for the car and car seat, especially for a child over 40 pounds. Some car makers limit tether anchor use to a maximum child weight. Others say to follow the the car seat maker’s recommendations for tethering. Check the owner’s manuals and call the manufacturers of the car and car seat if you have any questions.

Tether use is recommended for forward-facing car seats whenever possible, and is required for some car seats made for children with special needs. Some car seats for special needs have features to cope with anchor weight limits, such as by using two tether anchors or special shoulder belt routing (see instructions). Sometimes caregivers must get and install a heavy-duty tether anchor from the car seat maker. (Car dealers usually will not install these; contact a local mechanic.)

A Child Passenger Safety Technician can help you learn more about the benefits of tethers and how to use them as long as needed. (See Resources.)

Who can help me install a tether anchor?
Call your car dealer, body shop, or local mechanic. Most Chrysler, Ford, General Motors, and Toyota dealers will put in a tether anchor for free. Not all service people know about installing tethers. Refer them to service manuals or to the LATCH Manual (see below). For Toyota’s program, see SBS USA’s website, below.

Resources
- **Car Seat Questions:**
  - National Vehicle Safety Hotline: 888-327-4236, 800-424-9153 (tty) or www.safercar.gov
  - SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. (SBS USA) Helpline: 800-745-7233, 800-747-7266 (Spanish) or www.carseat.org
  - Includes Toyota retrofit program details.

- **Find a Child Passenger Safety Checkup Location:** 866-732-8243 or www.seatcheck.org


  800-403-1424 or www.saferidenews.com.
IF YOU’RE PREGNANT SEAT BELT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DRIVERS AND PASSENGERS

I’M PREGNANT. SHOULD I WEAR A SEAT BELT?

YES—doctors recommend it. Buckling up through all stages of your pregnancy is the single most effective action you can take to protect yourself and your unborn child in a crash.

NEVER drive or ride in a car without buckling up first!

WHAT’S THE RIGHT WAY TO WEAR MY SEAT BELT?

RIGHT

1. SHOULDER BELT away from your neck (but not off your shoulder)
2. across your chest (between your breasts) be sure to remove any slack from your seat belt
3. LAP BELT secured below your belly so that it fits snugly across your hips and pelvic bone

WRONG

1. SHOULDER BELT NEVER place under your arm or behind your back
2. LAP BELT NEVER place over or on top of your belly

SHOULD I ADJUST MY SEAT?

YES

1. ADJUST SEAT comfortable, upright position
2. keep as much distance as possible between your belly and the steering wheel*
3. comfortably reach the steering wheel and pedals**

NO

1. To minimize the gap between your shoulder and the seat belt, avoid reclining your seat more than necessary.

Avoid letting your belly touch the steering wheel.

* If you need additional room, consider adjusting the steering wheel or having someone else drive, if possible.
** If you’re a passenger, move your seat back as far as possible.
IF YOU'RE PREGNANT SEAT BELT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DRIVERS AND PASSENGERS

WHAT IF MY CAR OR TRUCK HAS AIR BAGS?

You still need to wear your seat belt properly.

Air bags are designed to work with seat belts, not replace them.
Without a seat belt, you could crash into the vehicle interior, other passengers, or be ejected from the vehicle.

MY CAR HAS AN ON-OFF AIR BAG DISABLING SWITCH. SHOULD I TURN IT OFF?

NO. Doctors recommend that pregnant women wear seat belts and leave air bags turned on.
Seat belts and air bags work together to provide the best protection for you and your unborn child.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I AM INVOLVED IN A CRASH?

Seek immediate medical attention, even if you think you are not injured, regardless of whether you were the driver or a passenger.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT SAFECAR.GOV

U.S. Department of Transportation
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Child Car Safety

NHTSA www.nhtsa.gov

11426-120915-v6