

Safety Fact Sheet

Car Seat Safety: The Biggest Mistakes Parents Make, and How to Avoid Them

Not Using a Safety Seat Consistently

"We were only going to the grocery store ...", "He hates to ride in his car seat, so just this once I didn't make him ...", "She was having a meltdown, so I took her out of her seat for a minute to calm her down." We hear these words all too often from distraught parents after tragedy has struck. Remember, a one-time lapse can result in a lifetime of regret.



In any case, using a safety seat consistently and correctly is the law. Utah law requires that all children under the age of 19 be properly restrained in a seat belt and children under the age of eight must be in an approved child safety seat or booster seat. There's good reason for that. Every year, more than 90,000 children under age 8 are injured in car crashes, and more than 1,000 are killed. In fact, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for American children.

Using an Old or Secondhand Seat

That safety seat you scored at a garage sale for a fraction of its original price may seem like a bargain, but it could cost your child's life. The same goes for that older-model seat your sister gave you after her child outgrew it.

Not only are used seats unlikely to come with the manufacturer's instructions (vital for correct installation), but they could be missing important parts, have been involved in a crash (even unseen damage can affect the seat's functioning), fall short of current safety standards, or have been recalled due to faulty design. Moreover, plastic gets brittle as it gets older, so a seat that's too old could break in a crash. Generally, car seats expire within six years of the manufacture date.

Turning Your Child Forward Facing too Soon

Children have large heads and comparatively weak necks, so in a head-on collision (the most common type of crash) a child's head can jerk forward suddenly and violently, resulting in spinal injuries. For this reason, keep your child in the rear-facing position as long as your car seat will allow you.

The "1 year and 20 pounds" rule that many parents cite when turning their child forward is actually the *minimum* size and age requirement. If your child can still ride comfortably facing backward at more than 1 year and 20 pounds, leave him that way! Just be sure the seat is designed to hold children of his weight and height.

Moving Your Child Out of His Car Seat or Booster Too Soon

Here are some recommendations:

- Your child should ride in a safety seat with a five-point harness until he/she weighs at least 40 pounds, or until they no longer fit in their forward facing seat. Check the seat for the manufactures weight and height restrictions.
- Your child should ride in a booster seat from the time he weighs 40 pounds and until they are 4'9" or 80 pounds. Remember in Utah they must be in a booster seat until they are eight years old unless they are 57 inches, which is 4'9". Note that some booster seats will go up to 100 pounds.

Not Installing a Safety Seat Correctly

A safety seat will NOT do its job if it's not installed correctly. Among the most common mistakes: Not buckling the car seat in tight enough, the harness straps are too loose, retainer clip too low, and not using the right type of seat belt to secure your child in his booster seat. When installing a car seat they should not move more than an inch back in forth. Booster Seats **MUST** be used with a lap-and-shoulder belt only. If your car only has lap belts then do not use the booster seat.

You may also install car seats with the LATCH system. By law, all car seats *and* vehicles manufactured since September 2002 must be compatible with the LATCH system — or "lower anchors and tethers for children."

This system combines the previously existing top tethers with lower anchors, built into the rear of the car. Some cars built between 1999 and 2002 also have the system. Make sure to check the owners book in your car to see which positions allow you to install the LATCH system. The seat belt or LATCH system are both safe but you must use one or the other, never both. Booster seats do not require LATCH. Only use the lap and shoulder belt with booster seats.

Not Using a Locking Clip or Using it Incorrectly

If your car is a pre-1996 model, chances are the lap-and-shoulder belts don't lock unless you come to a sudden stop. This means you need a locking clip — a small metal device that looks like an oversize paper clip or capital I — to hold your child's car seat tight in the event of a crash.

After you buckle your child's seat tightly in place, see if you can move it more than an inch back and forth. If you can, tighten the seat belt again as tight as possible, hold it so it will not move and then unbuckle the belt and install the locking clip about half an inch above the buckle. After you have done that, buckle the belt again. You may have to do this a couple times to get it just right. If you've misplaced the locking clip that came with your car seat, get in touch with the manufacturer to order a replacement or buy a new one at a store that carries car seats and other safety supplies.

Not Securing Your Child in the Seat

To make sure the car seat harness straps are snug enough to hold your child firmly in the event of an crash:

- Buckle your child in, making sure the harness straps are not twisted, and then use the mechanism on the front or back of the car seat to pull the harness tight. You shouldn't be able to pinch any harness fabric between your fingers.

- Slide the plastic retainer clip that holds the two straps together up to armpit level before securing it. If the clip is too low, your child could be ejected from his seat in a crash.

Not Buckling a Car Seat into the Car

Believe it or not, many parents who are cited for car seat violations have their child buckled into a car seat — but have not buckled the car seat to the *car*! This may be the result of confusion about how the seat works or just switching a seat from one car to another on a hectic morning.

Whatever the reason, when you're putting your child in his seat, double-check to be sure that the seat is buckled tightly to the car.

Holding Your Child on Your Lap

It's tempting to lift your child out of the car seat and hold him in your arms when they are having a tantrum after hours on the road, or when you're making a quick dash from one place to another with a bunch of friends and it's easier for everyone to pile into the same vehicle than to take separate cars.

This might *seem* safe enough, right? NO, never, ever do this! The truth is that even if *you're* belted in, your child will be ripped from your arms by the force of a collision. If you manage to get the seat belt around both of you, your weight could actually crush your child to death.

So as much as your child may scream — and as inconvenient as taking your own car is when the two of you could just hop into someone else's — *never* let your child ride in a moving car unless they are safely strapped into an age-appropriate, correctly installed car seat or booster.

Letting Two Kids Share One Seat Belt

Don't do it. Crash tests have shown that when two children ride buckled into one seat belt, in the event of a crash their heads can knock together with potentially fatal force.

Letting Your Child Ride in the Front Seat

Although your child may whine and plead to ride in the front seat with you, the backseat is by far the safest place for him. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) recommends that all children under age 13 ride in the backseat every time they get in the car.

Other tips on safe riding positions:

- If possible, buckle your child into the middle of the backseat, where they are best protected from side-impact collisions. (Of course, if you have more than one child only one can ride in the middle!) If your child rides in a booster seat and your car has only a lap belt in the center back (which is fine for car seats but should never be used on its own with a booster seat), position your child's booster on either the right or left side of the backseat and buckle them in with a lap and shoulder belt.
- If you have a passenger-side air bag in your car, that's all the more reason to keep your child in the back. Air bags are designed to reduce injuries in adults, but they can cause serious head and neck injuries to children when they inflate, especially if the child is in a rear-facing



car seat. To find out whether your car has air bags, look for a warning label on the sun visor or the letters SRS or SIR embossed on the dashboard, or check your vehicle owner's manual.

- If putting your child in the front seat is your only option (for example, if the backseat is full or your car is a two-seater), check to see whether your car's air bag has an on-off switch. If so, turn it off. If not, have one installed. The NHTSA maintains a list of companies that install air bag on-off switches.

If you can't turn your passenger-side air bag off and you need to transport a child in the front seat, put your biggest or tallest passenger in the front, in an appropriate safety seat, and move the seat as far back from the dashboard as possible.

If you have any questions on installation please call the Utah Safety Council to make an appointment or to find the nearest fitting station near you. (801) 478-7878 x 303



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