

When Should My Child Switch from a Car Seat to a Booster Seat?

You can safely switch your child to a booster seat if they weigh 40 pounds or more or has grown too tall for their car seat (when their shoulders are higher than the top set of harness-strap slots in the car seat's back). Whatever you do, don't move your child to a booster seat simply because they are on their third (or even their fourth) birthday. Car seats are the safest option, so keep using yours as long as it fits.

No matter when your child finally outgrows their car seat, it's imperative that you DO NOT skip the booster-seat step and go straight to using seat belts alone. Why? Because a booster positions your vehicle's lap and shoulder belt correctly on your child's strongest parts of their body such as the shoulders, sternum, hips and torso. Without it, the belts will be too high, falling across their belly and neck, where they can do serious damage in a crash. It is not surprising that most kids need to use booster seats until at least age 8.

When Can my Child Switch from a Booster Seat to Seat Belt Alone?

The answer depends on your child's size and age, the kind of vehicle you drive, and the law in your state. Remember in Utah, a child must be in a booster seat until age eight unless they are already 57 inches which is 4 feet 9 inches tall. Laws aside, kids are not ready to make the switch from a booster seat to seat belts until they are at least 4 feet 9 inches tall and can pass the five-step test below — typically between ages 8 and 10.

Booster seat protects a child better than seat belts alone, and in the event of a crash, an adult seat belt can actually *cause* injury instead of preventing it on a child. If the lap belt rests on your child's tummy (which it's likely to do without a booster), for instance, they could suffer stomach, liver, or spleen damage. And if the shoulder belt rests against their neck rather than the chest, they may try to move it under his arm (where it could crack his ribs and damage internal organs) or behind his back (where it offers no protection at all against head, neck, or spinal injuries).

To judge whether your child is ready to ride with a seat belt alone, test the fit of your vehicle's belts from time to time.

Buckle your child into the back seat *without* a booster seat, and consider the following:

- Do they sit all the way back against the car's seat?
- Do their knees bend comfortably at the edge of the seat?
- Does the lap belt naturally rest below the belly, touching the top of the thighs?
- Is the shoulder belt centered across their shoulder and chest?
- Can they stay seated like this for the whole trip?

If you answer no to any of these questions, your child still needs to use a booster seat (some are designed for kids weighing up to 100 pounds). Of course, your "big kid" may protest that boosters are for babies, so offer extra encouragement to help them feel better about keeping the booster seat a little longer. If the old booster seat has seen better days, for instance, go shopping together and let them choose a replacement with super-plush padding or a cool-looking cover. Whatever you do, make it clear that while certain things are negotiable during car rides (such as which music to listen to and whether the windows are rolled up or down), safety is not.

When your child *is* ready to move to a seat belt alone, do not buy a belt-positioning device to make the seat belt more comfortable for him; these add-ons actually make seat belts less effective. If he/she needs something to make the seat belt snug or to keep the shoulder strap off his neck, they should still be in a booster seat.

Also remember to buckle your Booster seat in when your child is NOT riding in seat. For one reason only, you do not want it to become a projectile if you are ever in a crash. If you have any questions on installation please call the Utah Safety Council at 801.746.SAFE (7233) ext. 303 to make an appointment or to find the nearest fitting station near you.

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