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## Belts, Boosters & Kids

Finding the best way to buckle up a toddler, preschooler or school-age child can be confusing. Almost half of those children ride without the protection of a child safety seat or safety belt. What is the best way to protect them?

### **Air Bag Danger: The Rear Seat Is The Safest Place For All Children**

In any vehicle, passengers in the rear seat are safer than in the front. Those in the rear are farther from the point of impact in serious head-on crashes.



If your vehicle has a passenger air bag, the rear seat is the only safe place for children. Given what we know today, a child under age 13 and about five feet tall is NOT safe riding in the front seat. Even if your child is correctly buckled up, there is a small risk of serious injury or death when the force of the air bag is unleashed.

Because air bags in cars today are designed to fire in very low-speed crashes, the danger is very real if parents and children ignore this warning.

If you have absolutely no way to avoid putting a child in front, the tallest child should be the one selected. Take these steps to reduce the risk:

- Move the seat as far back as possible.
- Make sure the child uses the full restraint system and does not lean forward.
- NEVER put a rear-facing infant in front!

Be sure to read the vehicle owner's manual for information about the specific restraints installed in your vehicle. Some trucks have air bag shut-off switches, because there is no back seat for children. Other vehicles with special air bag features may become available soon.

### **When Can My Child Stop Using A Convertible Or Toddler Seat?**

Do not push your child out of a safety seat too soon. A restraint with two shoulder straps and a shell is generally more protective than a booster seat or a safety belt. A child should use a convertible or toddler seat as long as it fits, which means until the:

- Upper weight limit is reached, usually 40 pounds
- Shoulders are above the strap slots
- Ears are above the back of the restraint.

Some built-in child seats in new vehicles have harnesses with two shoulder straps for children up to 60 pounds. If your vehicle has this kind, take advantage of it!

## **An Auto Booster Seat - The Next Step**

A booster seat is the best option for children over 40 pounds. Vehicle belts seldom fit 3 to 8 year-old children properly. Serious spinal and abdominal injuries can occur if the lap belt does not fit.

Check out all the vehicles in which your child rides. Check how the lap belt lies across your child's body.

- Does your child tend to slouch in the vehicle?
- Does the belt go up across the belly?
- Does the shoulder belt cross his throat? These are signs of poor fit.

Booster seats are designed to improve the fit of safety belts. Most children under 7, 8, or even 9 years of age will get better protection from a booster seat than a belt alone.

## **How Should The Lap Belt Fit?**

The lap belt should fit low and tight across the top of the thighs, not up on the belly. If a child is too short to sit upright with buttocks against the seatback, it will be hard to fit the lap belt right and keep it there.

## **How Should The Shoulder Belt Fit?**

The shoulder belt should cross the shoulder, not the throat or face. Many children are too short for the belt to be comfortable, so they misuse it in dangerous ways. It is very hazardous to put the belt under the arm, which can lead to life-threatening internal injuries. Putting the belt behind the back increases the risk of serious head injury.

Some vehicles have built-in shoulder belt guides or height adjusters to help the belts fit better. Most high-back boosters have shoulder belt guides. Add-on shoulder belt adjusters are not controlled by federal standards. In some cases they may make belts work less well. An add-on adjuster should not be used instead of a safety seat or booster.

A belt-positioning booster seat raises the child up so that both shoulder and lap belts fit better.

## **Which Type Of Booster Is Best?**

Which type you choose depends on the safety belt systems in the vehicles in which your child rides. These are the types and features:

- Belt-positioning booster (BPB): a booster without a shield designed to be used with a lap and shoulder belt. The belts restrain the child. The BPB provides better protection than a shield booster because the shoulder belt reduces the distance that the child's head can move in a crash and limits what it could hit. This kind should never be used with only a lap belt.

- BPB with a high back: is best if your vehicle has low seatbacks. Some models also have an internal harness for use as a conventional forward-facing seat for children under 40 pounds.
- Shield booster: is intended for use with a lap belt. The shield restrains the child. This kind is less effective as children get taller. None have a high back. (All shield boosters made today have removable shields.)
- Booster with a removable shield: can be used with either type of belt system. This can be very convenient, especially if the shield is easily taken off and replaced. None have a high back.

### **What If I Have A Shield Booster And My Car Has Shoulder Belts?**

If you want the best benefit for your child, switch to a BPB. If you choose to continue using the shield booster, most instructions state that the shoulder belt should go behind the back rather than across the child's chest.

Shield boosters are meant to work with the child's body wrapping around the shield in a crash. If the shoulder belt is in front, it could prevent the shield from functioning correctly.

### **Selecting Restraints For Children Over 40 Pounds (top priority listed first)**

- Belt-positioning booster with lap & shoulder belt -a high back BPB is most preferred.
- Booster with removable shield, if your child will ride in positions with both types of belts.
- Shield booster if only a lab belt is available.
- Lap/shoulder belt for taller child, when both belts fit correctly.
- Lap belt alone for shorter child or if no shoulder belt is available and if belt fits correctly.

### **Should I Use A Locking Clip With A Booster Seat?**

Yes, with a shield booster. The locking clip secures the booster by holding the lap belt tight around the shield or through the base of the booster.

No, with belt-positioning boosters. The BPB merely positions the child beneath the lap/shoulder belt. The belt functions properly without a locking clip. Century is the only manufacturer recommending the locking clip with a BPB at this time.

### **When Can I Safely Move My Child From A Booster To A Belt?**

This depends on when the safety belts in your vehicle properly fit your child. As your child grows, try on the belts from time to time. Avoid pushing him/her too early into a poorly fitting belt.

Instructions for most no-back booster seats state that a child should stop using the seat when his/her ears are above the seatback. This reduces the chance of whiplash injury in rear end collisions. Depending on the height of the seatback, even a fairly short child may be too tall when using a booster without a back. A high-back booster can be used if your vehicle has lap and shoulder belts.

If your vehicle has seats with low backs and only lap belts, you will have to make a choice. You can continue booster seat use to reduce the known risk of serious injury from poor belt fit. Or you can use the lap belt alone to limit whiplash. If you decide to stop using the booster, be very particular about lap belt fit. Make sure your child always sits straight and keeps the lap belt tight and low.

## **Tips For Parents**

- Avoid calling boosters "baby seats" - astronauts, pilots, and race car drivers buckle up.
- Always follow child seat and vehicle manuals.
- Insist that everyone in your car buckles up- no exceptions.

## **Set a good example - buckle up yourself!**

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