

Child Passenger Safety Frequently Asked Questions

(Questions are answered according to best practice guidelines per the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration)

Q: What is the best car seat?

A: We do not recommend any particular manufacturer or model. The “best” car seat is the seat that fits your child’s age and weight, fits well into your vehicle and can be used properly every trip. All seats on the retail market have had to pass the same Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards. For this reason, do not let a high price mislead you to think that the seat is safer than its lower priced neighbor on the shelf.

Q: Which seating position in my vehicle should I install my child’s safety seat?

A: If you only have one car seat to install in your vehicle, our recommendation is to install it in the center rear seating position of your vehicle. This position is the furthest from any collision point – front, back or either side. This is NOT to say that the outboard (side) seating positions are unsafe or inappropriate to use for a car seat installation.

Q: Is the LATCH system safer to use to install my child’s car seat than my vehicle’s seat belt system?

A: No. The LATCH system is newer but is not safer. The LATCH system and vehicle seat belt systems are equally safe. You need to use the system that is going to provide you with the best installation – your car seat should not move more than 1 inch side to side or front to back when you are finished installing it. You will choose one system for installation, do not use both at the same time. Check your vehicle owner’s manual for additional information.

Q: What if my baby weighs more than 20 pounds but is not yet 1 year old?

A: Use a seat that can be used rear-facing by children who weigh more than 20 pounds (convertible seat) and keep your baby rear-facing in the convertible seat as long as the seat will allow – usually 30 to 35 pounds.

Q: My 21 pound, 9 month old daughter is rear-facing but her feet are touching the back of the vehicle seat. Shouldn’t I turn her forward facing?

A: No. By law, she must remain rear-facing until she is at least 1 year of age AND at least 20 pounds – she must meet both criteria. It is also important to consider and compare potential injuries in a crash rear-facing versus forward-facing. A rear-facing child safety seat absorbs a majority of the crash forces and a child’s body (head and neck) is supported very well. In a forward-facing child safety seat, the child’s body (head and neck) must endure much more. Rear-facing with a child’s feet touching the back of the vehicle seat may result in an injury such as a broken leg(s), forward-facing a child too early may result in an injury such as a stretched spinal cord. Children should remain rear-facing until the maximum weight limit that their seat allows which can be 30-35 pounds.

Q: What if my car only has lap belts in the back seat?

A: Lap belts work fine to install an infant-only seat, a convertible seat and a forward-facing with harness seat. They cannot be used with a booster seat. If your car only has lap belts, use a forward-facing car safety seat with harness and higher weight limit (> 40 pounds).

Q: Is there a difference between high-back and low back booster seats?

A: Both types of boosters are designed to raise your child so the seat belt fits properly. High back boosters must be used in vehicles that do not have head rests or have low seat backs. Low back booster seats can be safely used in vehicles with headrests and high seat backs. The lower and upper weight limits for these two types of boosters also differ. Be sure to check your manufacturer instruction manual to make sure your child fits within their recommendations.

Q: I've seen products that say they can help make the seat belt fit better. Should we get one of these?

A: No, these products should not be used. In fact, they may actually interfere with proper seat belt fit by causing the lap belt to ride too high on the stomach and making the shoulder belt too loose. They can even damage the seat belt. This rule applies to car seat seats too; do not use any extra products unless they came in the box with the seat. There are no federal safety standards for these products and until there are, they are not recommended. As long as children are riding in the correct restraint for their size and age, they should not need to use any additional devices.

Q: My sister-in-law told me that car seats expire. Is this true?

A: Yes. Car seat manufacturers are now stamping a date on the shell of their products stating to not use the seat after "x/x/xxxx" date. On average, the life span of a car seat is 5 to 6 years depending on the manufacturer. Call your manufacturer for additional information.

Q: How old does my child have to be to graduate out of his/her booster seat?

A: Per Iowa law, a child must ride in a booster seat until their sixth birthday. However, it is more about a child's fit in the vehicle seat than it is age related. Your child should remain in a booster seat until they can sit all the way back in the vehicle seat, their knees bend over the edge of the seat and their feet touch the floor. When buckled up without a booster, the shoulder belt should cross the child's hard collar bone (not the neck or face) and the lap belt should cross the child's hard hip bones and upper thigh area (not the tummy). If these things are not met, the child is not yet big enough to ride without a booster seat.

Q: When can my child ride in the front seat?

A: All children 12 and under should ride in the rear seat of a vehicle.