



Car Safety Seats

How can I keep my child safe in the car?

- The most important thing you can do to reduce your child’s risk of serious injury and death is to provide proper child seat restraints. Using recommended car seats, booster seats, and seatbelts greatly reduces your child’s risk of being injured or killed in an accident.
- Recommendations are based on your child’s age, height, and weight. You must have an appropriate, backward-facing car seat before you drive your newborn home from the hospital. All child car seats belong in the back seat, never the front seat!
- After outgrowing car seats, your child should ride in a booster seat until he or she is tall enough to wear lap and shoulder belts. Seatbelts greatly reduce the risk of serious injury or death for adults as well as children. The driver and all passengers should “buckle up” every time they ride in their vehicle.

What kind of car seat do I need for my infant?

Children who are less than 2 years old should ride in a backward-facing car seat. Some models are “infant-only” seats; these are smaller and more portable, among other advantages. Others are “convertible” seats, which you may be able to continue using until your baby is bigger.

Infant and child car seats must always be placed in the back seat, never in the front seat! If you’re in an accident and the car’s air bags deploy, they can cause serious or even fatal injuries to the baby if he or she is in the front seat. The back seat is the safest place for all children.

- Follow the manufacturer’s instructions carefully to be sure that you are installing the car seat properly. It can be a little difficult to figure out at first! Fairfax County police departments offer safety checks to be sure car seats are correctly placed.
- Make sure the seatbelts are securely fastened to hold the car seat in place. Make sure your baby is buckled into the seat. Remember to check and adjust the straps as your baby grows.

Children older than 2 years old can ride in a forward-facing car seat. Convertible infant seats can be turned to face forward, or you can obtain a special toddler seat. It’s best to keep your baby “rearfacing” as long as he or she fits in the car seat.

- Again, make sure to follow the manufacturer’s instructions for installation. With convertible seats, make sure you use the proper “forward-facing” slots.

Your baby or toddler must be properly secured in his or her car seat every time you drive. While driving, don't turn around to attend to your child. If necessary, pull off the road and park the car in a safe place before checking on your infant.

What kind of safety equipment do I need for my older child?

In general, children should ride in a car seat as long as possible before moving to a **booster seat**—usually when they reach about 40 pounds (18 kilograms). The maximum height and weight may be listed by the manufacturer. “Shield” booster seats are not recommended because of safety concerns.

The booster seat raises your child up a few inches, allowing the lap and shoulder belts to fit properly around his or her body. The lap belt should lie across your child's thighs and the shoulder belt across the chest.

When can my child use a regular seatbelt?

In general, children no longer need a booster seat when they are about 8 years old and 4 feet, 9 inches (145 centimeters) tall. However, your child should stay in the booster seat until the seatbelts (lap and shoulder belt) fit correctly. Your child should be able to sit back with his or her legs over the seat. Make sure the shoulder belt is not over your child's neck.

Children who are under 13 years old and less than 4 feet, 9 inches tall should ride in the back seat. In general, the back seat is the safest place to ride (for adults as well as children). Also, in a crash, front seat air bags may cause injury to child passengers (and small adults).

When should I call your office?

Talk to the doctor if you have any questions about child passenger safety. We may be able to put you in touch with helpful community resources (for example, safety checks, low-income assistance).

Where can I get more information?

- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has a list of locations providing free child safety seat inspections. On the Internet at www.seatcheck.org, or call 1-866-SEATCHECK (1-866-732-8243).
- The American Academy of Pediatrics offers a Car Seat Guide on the Internet at www.aap.org/family/carseat.htm