

# Car Safety Seat Checkup

Using a car safety seat correctly makes a big difference. Even the right seat for your child's size may not properly protect your child in a crash unless it is used correctly. So take a minute to check to be sure.

## ► Does your car have air bags?

- Never place a rear-facing car safety seat in the front seat of a vehicle that has a front passenger air bag. If the air bag inflates, it will hit the back of the car safety seat, right where your baby's head rests, and could cause serious injury or death.
- The safest place for all children younger than 13 years to ride is in the back seat.
- If an older child must ride in the front seat, a child in a forward-facing car safety seat with a harness may be the best choice. Just be sure the vehicle seat is moved as far back from the dashboard (and the air bag) as possible.

## ► Is your child facing the right way for weight, height, and age?

- All infants and toddlers should ride in a rear-facing car safety seat until they are at least 2 years of age or until they reach the highest weight or height allowed by their car safety seat's manufacturer.
- Any child aged 2 years and older who has outgrown the rear-facing weight or height limit for their car safety seat should use a forward-facing car safety seat with a harness for as long as possible, up to the highest weight or height allowed by their car safety seat manufacturer. This also applies to any child younger than 2 years who has outgrown the rear-facing weight or height limit of their seat.

## ► Is the harness snug?

- Harness straps should fit snugly against your child's body. Check the car safety seat instructions to learn how to adjust the straps.
- The chest clip should be placed at armpit level to keep the harness straps secure on the shoulders.

## ► Has your child outgrown the forward-facing seat?

- All children whose weight or height is above the forward-facing limit for their car safety seat should use a belt-positioning booster seat until the vehicle seat belt fits properly, typically when they have reached 4 feet 9 inches in height and are between 8 and 12 years of age.
- A seat belt fits properly when the shoulder belt crosses the middle of the chest and shoulder, the lap belt is low and snug across the thighs, and the child is tall enough so that when he sits against the vehicle seat back, his knees bend at the edge of the seat and his feet hang down. (See Figure 5 and 6.)

## ► Does the car safety seat fit correctly in your vehicle?

- Not all car safety seats fit properly in all vehicles.
- Read the section on car safety seats in the owner's manual for your car.

## ► Can you use the LATCH system?

- LATCH (Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children) is a car safety seat attachment system that can be used instead of the seat belt to install the seat. These systems are equally safe, but in some cases, it may be easier to install the car safety seat using LATCH.
- Vehicles with the LATCH system have anchors located in the back seat, where the seat cushions meet. Top tether anchors are located behind the seat, either on the panel behind the seat (in sedans) or on the back of the seat, ceiling, or floor (in most minivans, SUVs, and hatchbacks). All car safety seats have attachments that fasten to these anchors. Nearly all passenger vehicles and all car safety seats made on or after September 1, 2002, have LATCH anchors.
- The top tether improves the safety provided by the seat. Use the tether for all forward-facing seats, even those installed using the vehicle seat belt. Always follow both the car safety seat and vehicle manufacturer instructions, including weight limits, for lower anchors and top tethers. Remember, weight limits are different for different car safety seats and different vehicles.



Figure 1. Rear-facing-only car safety seat.



Figure 2. Convertible car safety seat used rear-facing.

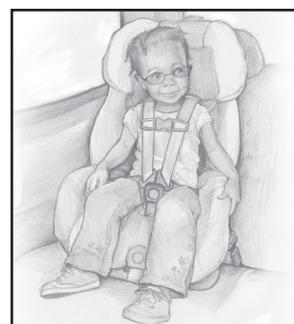


Figure 3. Forward-facing car safety seat.

## ► Is the seat belt or LATCH strap in the right place and pulled tight?

- Route the seat belt or LATCH strap through the correct path. Convertible seats have different belt paths for when they are used rear-facing or forward-facing (check your instructions to make sure).
- Pull the belt tight. Apply weight into the seat with your hand while tightening the seat belt or LATCH strap. When the car safety seat is installed, be sure it does not move more than an inch side to side or toward the front of the car.

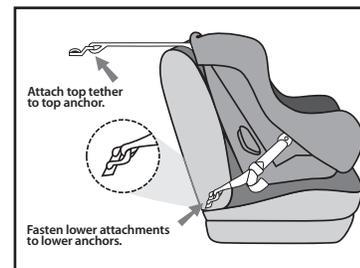


Figure 4. Car safety seat with LATCH.

- If you install the car safety seat using your vehicle's seat belt, check the vehicle owner's manual to see if you need a locking clip to keep the belt locked into position. Locking clips are not needed in most newer vehicles, but you may need to fully extend the seat belt first and then allow it to retract in order to keep the seat belt tight around the car safety seat. Many car safety seats have built-in lock-offs to lock the belt.
- It is best to use the tether that comes with your car safety seat to the highest weight allowed by the vehicle and car safety seat manufacturer. Check the vehicle owner's manual and car safety seat instructions for how and when to use the tether and lower anchors.



**Figure 5.** Belt-positioning booster seat.



**Figure 6.** Lap and shoulder seat belt.

### ▶▶ Do you have the instructions for the car safety seat?

- Follow them and keep them with the car safety seat.
- Be sure to fill out and mail in the registration card that comes with the car safety seat. It will be important in case the seat is recalled.
- Keep your child in the car safety seat until she reaches the weight or height limit set by the manufacturer. Follow the instructions to determine whether your child should ride rear-facing or forward-facing and whether to install the seat using LATCH or the vehicle seat belt.

### ▶▶ Has the car safety seat been recalled?

- You can find out by calling the manufacturer or the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Vehicle Safety Hot Line at 888/327-4236 or the NHTSA Web site at [www.safercar.gov](http://www.safercar.gov).
- Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions for making any repairs to your car safety seat.

### ▶▶ Do you know the history of your child's car safety seat?

- Do not use a used car safety seat if you do not know the history of the seat.
- Do not use a car safety seat that has been in a crash, has been recalled, is too old (check with the manufacturer), has any cracks in its frame, or is missing parts.
- Make sure it has a label from the manufacturer and instructions.
- Call the car safety seat manufacturer if you have questions about the safety of your seat.

## Questions

If you have questions or need help installing your car safety seat, find a certified child passenger safety (CPS) technician. A list of certified CPS technicians is available by state or zip code at <http://cert.safekids.org> (information is available for children with special needs and in Spanish). A list of inspection stations—where you can go to learn how to correctly install a car safety seat—is available in English and Spanish at [www.seatcheck.org](http://www.seatcheck.org) or toll-free at 866/SEATCHECK (866/732-8243). You can also get this information by calling the toll-free NHTSA Vehicle Safety Hot Line at 888/327-4236, from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm ET, Monday through Friday.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) offers more information in the brochure *Car Safety Seats: A Guide for Families*. Ask your pediatrician about this brochure or visit the official AAP Web site for parents, [www.HealthyChildren.org](http://www.HealthyChildren.org).

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

Although the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is not a testing or standard-setting organization, this guide sets forth AAP recommendations based on the peer-reviewed literature available at the time of its publication and sets forth some of the factors that parents should consider before selecting and using a car safety seat.

Listing of resources does not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP is not responsible for the content of the resources mentioned in this publication. Phone numbers and Web site addresses are as current as possible, but may change at any time.

Figures 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 by Anthony Alex Le Tourneau.

Figure 4 source: *LATCH Makes Child Safety Seat Installation as Easy as 1-2-3* on [NHSTA.gov](http://NHSTA.gov). Accessed January 1, 2012.

## From your doctor