



Guidelines for Using Child Car Seats Safely

Knowing what kind of car seat your child needs and how to install it in your car is important for your child's safety. This Family Education Sheet explains the latest guidelines.

For more information on car seats and installation, contact Boston Children's Child Passenger Safety Program:

Phone: 617-355-7332

Online: bostonchildrens.org/injury

Email:
injurypreventionprogram@childrens.harvard.edu



For more car seat info, scan this with your phone camera or QR code reader!

What is the Massachusetts Child Passenger Safety Law?

The Massachusetts Child Passenger Safety Law says that children must ride in a government-approved child passenger restraint (a car seat, booster seat, or seatbelt). You must fasten this restraint correctly.

- This law is in effect for all children until they are either 8 years old or 4 feet, 9 inches tall.
- A child must be 13 years old to sit in the front seat.

What kind of car seat should I get for my child?

Car seats for infants (ages 2 and younger)

- Infants must sit in a car seat in the back seat of the car. The car seat must be **rear-facing** (where the infant is facing the back of the car).
- Children must be rear-facing until they reach the maximum height and weight limit listed by the car seat maker.



Follow these guidelines for rear-facing car seats:

- Make sure the harness straps sit at or below the shoulders.
- Make sure the harness clip sits across the chest at armpit level.
- Make sure the harness straps are tight – but not too tight. Only 1 of your fingers should be able to fit under the harness strap at your child's collarbone.

- Keep the seat at a 30°–45° angle. This helps keep your child's airway open so they can breathe.
- Keep the infant car seat in the back seat, never in the front passenger seat. An airbag could seriously hurt your child if there's an accident.

As your child grows, their legs may hit the back of the seat. This is OK and not a safety issue. It becomes a safety issue when their head is less than 1 inch from the top of the car seat.

Car seats for toddlers (about age 2 and up)

- Children can move into a forward-facing car seat (facing the front of the car) when they're the maximum height and weight for the rear-facing car seat.



Follow these guidelines for forward-facing car seats:

- Put the car seat in the upright position in the back seat of the car.
- Tighten the harness straps at or above the shoulders.
- Tighten the harness clip across the chest at armpit level.
- Make sure the harness straps are tight – but not too tight. Only 1 of your fingers should be able to fit under the harness strap at your child's collarbone.

Booster seats (ages 4-8)

Booster seats help a seatbelt fit your child correctly. They are used for children about 4–8 years old.

- All children who are over the weight and height limits for front-facing car seats must be in a booster seat in the back seat of the car until they are 8 years old or 4 feet, 9 inches tall.
- Children must use a lap and shoulder belt while in a booster seat.



Follow these guidelines for using a booster seat:

- Place the shoulder belt across your child's **shoulder—not** their neck.
- Place the lap belt across their hips, not their stomach.

Car seats for children with special needs

Boston Children's has a limited supply of special needs car seats available in the hospital. These car seats include car beds for infants who must travel lying down for medical reasons. Talk with your child's doctor or nurse if you feel your child may need a special car seat.

How do I install my child's car seat?

There are 2 ways to install a car seat:

- Use the seatbelts in your car
- Use the Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children (LATCH) Restraint System

Cars made after September 2002 have at least 2 LATCH anchors in the back seat. Check your car's manual to find out where they are.

Using top tethers

Top tethers must be used for front-facing car seats unless the car seat maker has different directions. Look in your manual for tether connector locations. They are usually behind the headrest of the vehicle seat.

How do I test how tight the installation is?

- Use your weak hand (the hand you do not write with) and try to move the car seat side-to-side where the belt or the lower anchors are connected.
- It's tight enough if it doesn't move more than 1 inch side-to-side.

When should I replace my child's car seat?

Car seats expire 6 years from the date they were made. Every car seat has a label on it that says:

- Date it was manufactured (made)
- Model number
- Type

Should I register my child's car seat?

- Yes!
- Car seats usually come with registration cards. You should mail your car seat registration card to the manufacturer and register your child's car seat online. If the manufacturer recalls the car seat, they should contact you if you've registered your seat with them.
- Sometimes a company will announce a recall for a kind of car seat. This means that there's something about the car seat that doesn't work the way it should. If your child's car seat is recalled, you can return it to the company or bring it back to the store. It will be repaired or replaced.

This Family Education Sheet is available in [Arabic](#), [Portuguese](#), [Simplified Chinese](#) and [Spanish](#).