

Child Passenger Safety

If you regularly drive around with child passengers, have you done everything possible to make sure they're safe? Are you familiar with what is involved in keeping children safe? If you're not, here are some tips on protecting children, the persons most vulnerable to injuries during car accidents.

Child Restraint Laws

While you might think it would be safe to comply with your state's child safety or restraint law, you would be wrong in many states. A National Safe Kids campaign review of the states' child restraint laws found them to be inadequate. Based upon the guidelines of its own model child restraint law, nearly every state inadequately protects its children by falling short in the following areas:

- penalties for restraint law violations are too low to encourage compliance
- rarely establishes restraint guidelines for children older than eight
- too many exceptions to the restraint laws exist
- few states offer child-seat loaner or assistance programs

How Are Child Passengers Best Protected?

Here are some considerations for protecting young auto passengers:

Infants - Should be in well-constructed and padded infant carrier that should be located in a rear seat. Infant seats should be designed to face the rear of the seat and NOT the front of the passenger area. Infants must be protected from the chance of being thrown forward into hard surfaces.

Toddlers - Should be in well-constructed, padded child carriers that, while facing forward, should only be placed in the rear passenger seats. Again, this is to minimize the chance of hitting hard surfaces (such as a dashboard or a windshield) and to avoid air bags that are designed to protect adults.

Pre-schoolers - May move from child carriers to well-constructed and padded booster seats. The purpose of the boosters is to make sure that the seat belts fit properly. As with child carriers, these restraints should be installed in rear passenger seats.

Older children - Around age 12, it should be safe to allow children to ride in a car's front seat. **HOWEVER**, the age guideline assumes that a child has become tall and heavy enough to be properly secured by regular restraints. Be careful that shoulder straps either fit these children properly or are properly tied-down so they don't represent a hazard. Also, be realistic.

Age is a secondary consideration to body size. If a child's small build results in a poor fit for regular seat belts and shoulder straps, continue placing the child in the rear with a secure seat belt.

A disconcerting fact from the National Safe Kid campaign survey is the high incidences of children who are allowed to ride in cars without restraints or while improperly secured. This sad fact results in hundreds of thousands of serious injuries and deaths. Every passenger in a vehicle should use restraints that are appropriate for his or her age and size. Don't depend on a law; depend on what's needed to keep everyone safe.

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