

Car Seats – Is Your Child Ready for the Next Stage?

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Motor vehicle accidents are a major cause of child injury, and the second leading cause of child death in the U.S. Proper use of the proper car seat can hugely reduce the risks. There are four stages of safety restraints. To choose the right level, it is more important to consider their height and weight than their age. **To maximize safety, keep your child in each level of seat as long as possible**, till they reach the **maximum** height and weight for that seat. **Each stage provides less protection**. Don't move to the next stage till you have to.

Rear-Facing. (Birth to 2 years or beyond)

Many states require that children ride rear-facing until they are at least 2 years of age, and, like the AAP, recommend that they be rear-facing until they reach the highest weight or height allowed by the manufacturer of their seat. (Typically infant seats are 22 – 35 pounds max, and convertibles are up to 40 or 50 pounds rear-facing.) Riding rear-facing reduces the risk of severe injury by 75%. It's OK if their legs bump up against the back seat or if they have to sit with their legs crossed to fit.

Forward-Facing Car Seat with a 5-point Harness. (Age 2 to 4 or beyond)

In many states, these are required until the child is at least 4 years, then recommended to continue for as long as possible till they reach height and weight limits. (Typically 50 – 65 pounds.)

Booster Seat. (Age 4 to ~8-12)

Some states require that children shorter than 4 feet 9 inches use a booster seat. Boosters insure the seat belt is properly positioned. Poorly fitted seatbelts are associated with injuries to the spine, intestines, head and neck. Boosters allow maximum weights up to 100 or 120 pounds. Kids typically reach 4'9" between age 8 and 12.

Seat Belt. If your child is at least 4 feet 9 inches tall, AND you can answer yes to these questions, then they're ready to move out of a booster seat and use a regular adult seatbelt.

- When child is sitting back in seat, do their knees bend comfortably at the edge of vehicle seat? Are their feet on the floor?
- Does the lap belt stay on the top of the child's thighs, not up on their belly?
- Is the shoulder belt centered on the child's chest and shoulder?
- Can the child stay seated this way for the whole trip? Without wiggling out of the seatbelt?

Proper Installation. For any carseat to provide adequate protection, it must be properly installed. So, be sure to carefully read the owner's manuals for the carseat and for your vehicle to be sure you install it correctly.

Front Seat. By Washington law, all children should ride in the back seat of the car until age 13. (Exceptions for: pickup trucks or sports cars with no back seat)

More info. Washington: <https://wacarseats.com>; Washington Law RCW [46.61.687](https://www.wa.gov/legislative/legislation/acts/2018/20180601); [Other states](#). General: <https://www.nhtsa.gov/equipment>; <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/142/5/e20182460/38530/Child-Passenger-Safety>