

# Selecting the Right Car Seat

## Stages of Car Seat Use

Child  
Safety  
Facts  
2014

The **SAFEST** car seat for your child is the one that . . .

### Fits your child

Children are safest when they stay in each of the stages below for as long as possible, riding in a car seat that fits them. Make sure your child is within the car seat weight and height guidelines. Check labels and instructions.

### Fits your car

Make sure the car seat fits correctly in your car before using it with your child. Not every car seat can be installed correctly in every car. If you need help, go to a local car seat inspection station (see Resources).

### Is easy for YOU to use correctly every time

Find a child car seat that is easy for you to use properly every time. The easier it is for you to use, the more likely you will use it correctly every time you travel.

## Stage 1: Ride Rear Facing



...from birth until baby meets the rear-facing size limit (about 24 months). Look for:

**Rear-facing-only car seat:** Use rear facing up to 22 to 40 pounds; small and easy to carry.

**Convertible car seat:** Use rear facing up to 30 to 50 pounds; large, stays in car; can be used forward facing when baby is much older and bigger.

## Stage 2: Ride Forward Facing in a Harness



...when over 24 months (at least over age 1 **AND** over 20 pounds), and as long as the harness fits by height and weight. Look for:

**Convertible, forward-facing-only, built-in car seat, or vest:** These fit up to at least 40 pounds; most can be used for children up to 65 to 80 pounds.

**Combination seat:** Use with the harness up to 40 to 90 pounds; can be used without the harness as a booster seat when child is older and heavier.

## Stage 3: Ride in a Booster Seat



...when the child has outgrown a harness but does not yet fit a seat belt (see below); likely to be up to 8 to 12 years old.

Look for one that goes to at least 100 pounds. One without a back is okay if the car has head restraints and the child does not nap while riding. One with a high back (shown) might protect better in side crashes.

**A booster must be used with a lap-shoulder belt.** If the car has only lap belts, don't use a booster. Instead, find a car seat with a harness that fits the child (see Resources). A car seat is also better for a child who can't sit still in a booster.

## Stage 4: Ride in a Lap-Shoulder Belt

...when the belt fits well, usually after 8 to 12 years old. To check fit, use the 5-Step Seat Belt Fit Test (see Resources).

## Crash Testing and Ratings

Every kind of child car safety seat (car seat) sold in the United States or Canada is required by law to pass tough crash tests. These tests show what would happen if a car was driven into a brick wall at high speed. This is a much more serious kind of crash than most people will ever be in. Car seats that pass these tests are safe to use.

Most car seat makers do more testing than required. They do these tougher crash tests to make sure their car seats are safe.

There are also several rating programs for car seats, such as *Consumer Reports*, *Baby Bargains*, IIHS fit ratings, and the NHTSA Ease-of-Use Ratings. Most programs are based on how easy the testers think the car seats are to use. *Consumer Reports* and IIHS also do some crash testing.

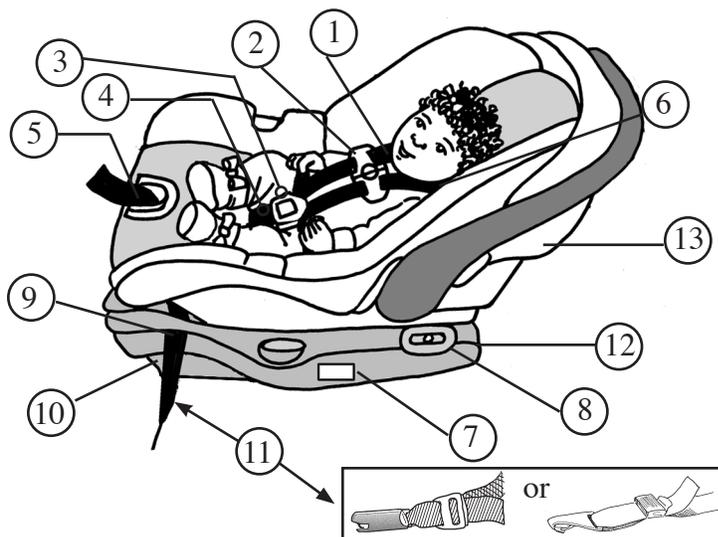
Rating programs can be helpful. Be aware, though, that a "best pick" may not be the best car seat to fit *your* child and *your* car. No car seat can be best for every family situation. Pick the car seat that works well for your child.

See page 2 for more information on choosing a car seat.

**Montgomery County CPS Program**  
Fire and Rescue Service  
For more information call:  
Hotline Number 240-777-2222

## Car Seat Features to Look For

- **Good size limits:** Check labels and instructions for height and weight limits that allow your child to use the car seat for a long time.
  - **For preemies and tiny babies:** A rear-facing car seat that can be used for babies under 5 pounds.
  - **For growing babies:** A car seat that can be used rear facing to at least 30 pounds.
  - **For preschoolers:** A convertible or forward-facing-only car seat that can be used to 50 or more pounds and over 45 inches.
  - **For young school-age children:** A booster that can be used to at least 100 pounds and up to 57 inches.
- **A 5-point harness:** This type has straps over the shoulders, hips, and between the legs. Avoid car seats with a 3-point harness or a harness with a shield (tray). These don't fit children as well, and most are now too old.
- **Harness buckle:** It should be easy to buckle and unbuckle. Buckle buttons are required to be stiff enough so kids cannot unbuckle them. Caregivers, especially those with arthritis, should find one that is not painful to buckle and unbuckle.
- **Harness adjuster:** A harness that adjusts by pulling a strap at the front of the car seat is easier to use than one that adjusts on the harness or at the back of the car seat.
- **Chest clip:** Check that this clip on the harness is easy to open and close.
- **Belt path** (for seat belt or LATCH strap): The opening for the seat belt or LATCH strap should be easy to fit a hand through. A pad that allows access from the front is helpful.
- **Seat belt lock-off:** Some car seats have a part that locks onto the car's lap and/or shoulder belt. Check the instructions and make sure the part is easy to use.
- **LATCH connectors:** Check your car manual to see if your car has LATCH. If it does, look for car seats with connectors that are easy for you to use. Connectors that push on and release with a push-button are usually easiest.
- **Angle-of-recline guides (on rear-facing seats):** They should be easy for you to see and understand.
- **Angle adjuster foot:** Some car seats (especially bases for rear-facing-only car seats) can be reclined as needed using an adjuster foot. For others, you may need to place a rolled towel or foam roll under the front of the car seat.



- Parts of a car seat:**
- |                      |                           |   |
|----------------------|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Harness (5-point) | 6. Shoulder harness slots | 10. Angle adjuster foot                                       |
| 2. Chest clip        | 7. Label(s)               | 11. LATCH lower attachment strap(s) (detail shows connectors) |
| 3. Buckle            | 8. Angle-of-recline guide | 12. Base (rear-facing-only car seats)                         |
| 4. Buckle strap      | 9. Belt path              | 13. Shell/carrier   |
| 5. Harness adjuster  |                           |   |

### Try Before You Buy

If possible, take the car seat to your car and install it before buying it. **Always** follow the instructions for the car seat and for the car. Make sure the car seat can be installed tightly. To check this, hold the car seat at the belt path and pull side to side and forward. It should not move more than one inch.

### Check a Second-Hand Car Seat Carefully

Whenever possible, use a new car seat. They are often easier to use and may have better safety features. If you do use a second-hand car seat, check it for problems. Make sure it has all its parts and instructions. Check if it has recalls. Any car seat that has been in a crash should not be used again. And don't use it if it is too old—many should not be used more than 6 years. If you are unsure about any of this, it is not a good car seat for your child!

### Don't Rush to the Next Stage

Moving too soon to the next stage is a very common mistake. Keep your child in each stage listed on page 1 as long as possible. Don't move to the next stage until your child has grown too tall or heavy to continue riding in his current stage.

### Resources

**National Vehicle Safety Hotline:** Car seat information, recalls, ratings: 888-327-4236, 800-424-9153(tty), [www.safercar.gov](http://www.safercar.gov)

**SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.:** 5-Step Seat Belt Fit Test, recall list, handouts: 800-745-7233, [www.carseat.org](http://www.carseat.org)

**Find a Child Passenger Safety Inspection Location:** 866-732-8243, [www.seatcheck.org](http://www.seatcheck.org)

**The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia:** [www.chop.edu/carseat](http://www.chop.edu/carseat)

**American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP):** [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)  
(See AAP's product listing to find car seats with high weight limits.)