

Auto Safety

Florida auto safety law requires seat restraints for infants and young children. Approved auto seat and seat belts are a MUST for the whole family, including your baby. Start with your drive home from the hospital.

What is the "best" car seat to buy? There is no specific brand that is necessarily the "safest" or best car seat. Do not feel that price necessarily reflects an increase in quality. Purchase a car seat that fits your infant or child's size and weight, fits in your car, and is "user friendly." Read the instructions and try them out. Make sure that you can fasten the vehicle seat belt snugly, without extra slack through the belt path on the car seat before you buy it. Also be sure to send in the registration card to the manufacturer so that they can notify you of any problems or recalls after your purchase.

Do not use a car seat that:

- Was ever in a crash.
- Was made before January 1981.
- Does not have a label with the date of manufacture and model number (you cannot check on recall notices).
- Has any visible crack in the frame of the seat. Is missing any parts.
- Does not come with instructions to ensure it's proper use.

Infant car seats can be used from birth until about 20lbs. Their advantages are they provide the best fit for your newborn and are both small and easily portable. Their disadvantage is that a convertible seat must replace them once your child reaches 20lbs. Also pay attention to your child's length. Many infant car seats can no longer be used once your child exceeds 26 inches in length. Sometimes this occurs prior to the child reaching 20lbs. Check each individual car seat for its specific limitations. Infant car seat should always be used rear-facing and in the back seat of your vehicle. This is especially true in the case of a passenger-side airbag.

Convertible car seats can accommodate newborns until they reach 40lbs. Their main advantage is their flexibility and longer duration of use.

However, as mentioned previously, they are bulkier and more cumbersome in the infant stage and do not always provide the best fit. There are three types of harness systems in this category of car seat. The 5-Point Harness has five straps. There are two at the shoulders, two at the hips and one at the crotch. This convertible car seat tends to fit small newborns better than the others because it can be adjusted to fit very snugly. The second system is the T-Shield, which consists of a padded triangular or T-shaped shield attached to shoulder straps that buckles into the seat at the crotch. Finally, the Tray Shield Harness utilizes a padded tray-like shield that swings down around the child. This is often too high and too far from the body of a small newborn to adequately secure it in the seat. Follow the directions for each particular model. Once a child has exceeded 20 lbs and two years of age, he/she **can** turn around and be secured in the car seat facing a forward direction; however, it is safer to remain rear-facing for as long as physically possible. The back seat of the vehicle still remains the preferred location for your child. One should also use tether straps for additional security that attach to the back of the car seat and attach to an anchoring clip on your vehicle. These straps are often included in the more expensive car seats such as the Britax Models. The clips they attach to can be found in any car that was manufactured on or after the year 2000. Otherwise your car dealer can install the appropriate mounting device.

The **L**ower **A**nchors and **T**ethers for **C**hildren (LATCH) System is designed to make installation of child safety seats easier by requiring child safety seats to be installed without using the vehicle's seat belt system. By September 1st, 2002, two rear seating positions of all cars, mini vans, and light trucks will come equipped with lower child safety seat anchorage points located between a vehicle's seat cushion and seat back. Also by September 2002, all new child safety seats will have two attachments, which will connect to the vehicle's lower anchorage attachment points. Together the lower anchors and the upper tethers make up the Latch system. Note that these newer car seats can still be secured utilizing the seat belt system should your car be an older model and not equipped with the seat anchorage points.

Forward Facing Only Seats are rated for children who are between 20 and 40 pounds. Some of the new models allow for use by children up to 60 lbs. They do not have the versatility of the convertible car seat.

Booster Seats are for those children over 40lbs. that have outgrown their car seats. **A belt-positioning booster seat** should be used if your car has both lap and shoulder belts. Be sure to keep the lap belt tight and low across your child's hips and make sure the shoulder belt lies flat across the shoulder and away from the face and neck. **A shield booster seat** must be utilized if your vehicle only has lap belts.

All children who have outgrown child safety seats should be properly restrained in booster seats until they are at least 8 years old, unless they are 4'9" tall. Be sure the seat belt in your car fits your child properly. Once again, the shoulder belt should fit across the shoulder and the lap belt must lie low and flat across the hips. All children age 12 and under should ride properly restrained in the back seat.