Every child deserves the best possible protection from injury while riding in a car. Some state car seat laws exempt children with medical conditions. However, any child riding without proper protection is at risk of injury, even in a minor crash.

Your child may have a condition that affects his ability to fit in or use a regular car safety seat (car seat), booster seat, or seat belt. There are car seats that are designed and tested for most special needs.

Which car seat is right for your child?

ONLY car seats meeting federal government standards or products modified and crash tested for special needs transport should be used. Do not make homemade changes to car seats. This can change the safety of the car seat.

For help finding the right car seat, talk to a healthcare provider who works with your child and knows about car safety. (See Resources on page 2.)

Conditions That May Require Special Attention

Too small
Premature and low birth weight infants are too small for many car seats. Some may need a car bed. (See the SRN Preemie fact sheet, Resources.)
Children should ride in a properly fitting car seat or booster as long as possible. Expect children who are much smaller to ride this way longer than others their age.

Too big
Some children outgrow a regular car seat but still need support. Vests and car seats with harnesses for children over 40 pounds are available (see Resources).

Difficulty sitting upright
Children with neuromuscular conditions may need positioning pads to sit up well. Speciality car seats and pads may be needed.

Medical fragility
Children with conditions such as breathing problems, tracheostomy, or brittle bones may require car seats with special features.

Hip and leg casts
Casts may make using most car seats impossible. A child in a spica cast may need to use a special car seat (Snug Seat Hippo—see picture on page 2). A larger child in a long-leg cast can lie flat in a Modified E-Z-ON Vest (picture below). Discuss car seat fit with the doctor before casting, if possible.

Impaired mobility
Some heavier children may need a wheelchair made for safe travel in a motor vehicle. (See Resources.)

Behavioral challenges
Some children are very active. An E-Z-ON Vest that opens in the back may be used. A behavior modification plan may help.

Car Safety Basics

✔ Use a car seat that fits your child’s weight, development, and condition. There are established methods and products for most conditions.

✔ Avoid modifying any car seat. If the one you have doesn’t fit your child’s needs, find another that does.

✔ ALWAYS follow car seat instructions and the car owner’s manual.

✔ Make shoulder straps snug to keep the child in the seat. You should not be able to pinch slack in the straps between your finger tips.

✔ Install the car seat tightly. ALWAYS use a tether if the directions suggest it. If both vehicle and car seat have LATCH attachments, use LATCH or the seat belt, whichever makes the car seat fit tighter. However, lower LATCH anchors often can’t be used for children over 40 or 48 pounds (check the car seat and car manuals).

✔ Buckle up children in back whenever possible. The back seat is safer than the front, with or without an air bag. The center of the back is the safest.

✔ NEVER transport a child rear facing in the front seat of a car with a passenger air bag unless the air bag has an on-off switch or sensor and the air bag has been shut off.

✔ Some cars have side-impact air bags in the back. These help protect children riding buckled up. Do not allow a child to lean against the window or door of these cars.

✔ The rear-facing position is the safest. Many car seats will hold children to 24 months and often longer.

✔ If you have questions, get help from a local person with training in car seats and special needs (see Resources).
Travel Tips for Children With Special Needs

- **The safest way** for a medically fragile child to ride depends on her size and condition. Limit travel as much as possible to reduce the risk of a crash.
- **The back seat is the safest place** for children. If your child needs to be watched at all times, have an adult ride in the back seat with him.
- **Plan to stop often** on long rides.
- If you must transport a child in the **front seat**, the front passenger air bag must be turned off. Pickup trucks or sports cars with very small back seats often have an on-off switch. Newer cars have air bag sensors that shut off the air bag or reduce its power when a child is in the front. Check the light on the dashboard to see that the sensor has turned off the air bag.
- **Have a medical care plan** with you in case of an emergency. Take along the names and numbers of healthcare providers and equipment suppliers.
- If your child needs **battery-powered equipment**, have enough power for twice the expected travel time.
- **Secure medical equipment** to keep it from being thrown around during a crash. Buckle an unused seat belt around it or put it on the floor and wedge pillows around it.
- **Make sure all caregivers** who transport your child follow your directions about buckling up your child.

**Crashworthy Wheelchairs**

Some wheelchair systems meet voluntary standards (WC-18, -19, and -20) for crash protection in a motor vehicle. Some are made for children. However, if possible, a child in a wheelchair should be moved into a car seat that fits her size and condition.

If using a wheelchair in a vehicle, it **MUST** face forward and be anchored with four tie-down straps. A separate lap-shoulder belt must be used for the child. Remove any hard objects (such as a tray) attached to the chair in front of the child and stow them for travel. For wheelchair safety information, see Resources.

**Air Bag On-Off Switches**

If there is no way to turn off the air bag, and your child requires monitoring in the front seat, you may get permission to install an on-off switch from NHTSA (see Resources).

**School Bus Transport**

Young children with special needs often ride on school buses. Appropriate transport (including car seats or other devices) should be part of the individual education plan (IEP) for each child. Parents should make sure that they understand and agree with what is recommended.

Some school buses have factory-installed seat belts or LATCH lower anchors for installing car seats. Belts must meet federal safety standards. Some buses have built-in safety harnesses or use car seats made just for buses. NHTSA has guidelines for transporting preschoolers on school buses (see Resources).

**Support and Positioning**

- A physical or occupational therapist can help you use rolled towels, blankets, or foam wedges to pad along the child's body and head. A very soft neck collar can be used for head support.
- Do not put extra padding under the child or behind his back. Thick pads or clothes prevent the harness from fitting snugly enough to hold him in a crash.
- If a child is large enough for a seat belt to fit, do not recline the vehicle seat back. In a crash, a child could slide under the lap belt. This could cause serious injury. For a child that needs extra support, an E-Z-ON Vest can be used.

**Resources: 2012**

- Special Needs Car Seat Technician list: see Nat’l Center (above) list at www.preventinjury.org/specneeds.asp
- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP): policy statements on safety issues (low birth weight infants, children with special needs, restraints on school buses), Car Safety Seats for Children with Special Needs (detailed guidelines); 847-228-5005 or www.aap.org/healthtopics/carseatsafety.cfm
- Exceptional Parent: information, support, outreach for families of children with special needs; www.eparent.com
- NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration): general child restraint information, recalls, air bag switches, and school bus safety information; the Auto Safety Hotline, 888-327-4236 or 800-424-9153 (tty), www.safercar.gov
- State/local assistance programs: Some Easter Seals affiliates, children’s hospitals, and special education centers have car seat loan programs for specialty products. Call local programs or your state’s office of traffic safety.
- SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.: national advocacy organization for child passenger safety; list of car seats for children over 40 pounds (#173); 800-745-7233, 800-747-7266 (Spanish), www.carseat.org
- Safe Ride News: newsletter; fact sheets on child safety, including preterm and low birth weight infants; 800-403-1424, www.safereidenews.com
- Find a local Child Passenger Safety Inspection Location: 866-732-8243; www.seatcheck.org

**Children with Special Needs**