Car Seat or Booster—Safer Than Seat Belt Alone

When does a child outgrow a car seat with a harness?

Your child should use a car seat with a harness for as long as possible. It will usually give more protection than a booster or a seat belt. Most car seats fit children up to at least 40 pounds, and many go up to 65 to 90 pounds.

Keep your child in a car seat until:
• The ears are above the top of the child seat, or
• The shoulders are above the top shoulder strap position, or
• The child’s weight is at the car seat’s upper limit (check the label or instructions).

When your child outgrows a car seat, he or she needs a booster seat.

What is a booster? What does it do?

A booster seat raises the child up to help the lap and shoulder belts fit right (picture, top). Using a booster seat in the rear seat reduces a child’s risk of injury by almost 60 percent. A booster also makes the child more comfortable and allows him to see out the window better.

A booster is NOT the best choice if:
• The child is over 40 pounds but too short for a booster.
• The child is too wiggly to sit still in a booster.
• There is no shoulder belt to use with the booster.

These children would be much safer riding in a car seat or harness with a higher weight limit. (See Resources.)

Why can’t my child use only a seat belt?

Seat belts are made to fit adults. They do not fit most children until at least age 8 to 12. If the lap belt is around or near the child’s waist (picture, bottom), it could cause serious injuries in a crash. If the shoulder belt is across the neck, a child might put it behind his back or under his arm. That also could cause very serious injuries.

When will my child be big enough to use a seat belt?

Use the 5-Step Seat Belt Test* to find out. Sit your child in the back seat and put on the seat belt. Check the steps below. If you answer “yes” to ALL of these questions, your child is big enough to use a seat belt without a booster.
• Can your child sit with a straight back against the vehicle seat back?
• In that position, do his legs bend comfortably at the edge of the vehicle seat?
• Does the lap belt stay low, touching the thighs (not on the belly)?
• Does the shoulder belt cross the center of his shoulder?
• Can your child sit this way without slouching during a long ride?

Note: All cars are not the same, so do this check for any car your child rides in.

* Adapted from SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. 5-Step Test

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**Car Safety Basics**

- Your child should use a car safety seat (car seat) with a harness for as long as possible, until at least age 4. After it’s outgrown, your child should ride in a booster seat.
- **ALWAYS** follow booster seat and car instructions.
- A lap-shoulder belt MUST be used with a booster. **NEVER** use only a lap belt with a booster.
- **If your car has no shoulder belts in the back seat,** see the other side of this sheet.
- Teach your child to buckle up and to pull up on the shoulder belt to make the lap part snug.
- **Use the back seat for all children under age 13.** The back seat is safer, with or without an air bag.
- The center of the back seat is safest. It is farthest away from impact in a crash. However, a child in a booster MUST sit where there is a shoulder belt.
- **ALWAYS** use your seat belt. Your child learns from what you do. Make sure everyone in the car buckles up.
- Make sure others who drive your child know you expect your child to use a car seat or booster.

**Warning:** Always secure a booster with a seat belt or LATCH when it is not being used. A loose booster can be thrown around in a sudden stop or crash and might injure others in the car.

Provided by:
Safe Kids Tarrant County
led by Cook Children’s
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**Fact Sheet**

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**Kinds of Booster Seats**

Most boosters fit children from 40 up to 80 to 120 pounds.

- **Booster with a high back**: This type helps prevent neck injuries if your car has low seatbacks. A high back also may provide better head protection in side impacts. The high back helps keep a sleeping child in place (picture, right). (Read instructions. A few cannot be used with low-back vehicle seats.)

- **Combination seat**: This kind of car seat has a harness for a child under a stated weight limit. The harness can be taken out to make it into a high-back booster for a larger child.

- **Booster with no back**: A backless booster (shown on page 1) is fine if the vehicle seat has a high back and your child does not sleep in the car. Older children may think they look more “grown up.”

**Choosing and Using a Booster Correctly**

A lap-shoulder belt MUST be used to hold your child in a booster. NEVER use a lap belt only. ALWAYS follow the instructions.

**Proper fit of the seat belt is important.** Choose a booster that makes your car’s seat belt fit your child correctly. Take your child with you when shopping for a booster.

**To check for proper fit:**

- Place your child on the booster and buckle the seat belt around your child. Use the seat belt guides on the booster.
- Check the lap belt position. It should be on top of the thighs or very low on the hips.
- Check the shoulder belt position. It should go across the middle of the shoulder. Most boosters have shoulder belt guides. Adjust these to help with proper fit. Make sure the belt slides through the guide easily.

**If a Car Has Only Lap Belts in Back**

A booster seat cannot be used with only a lap belt, so a different safety device is needed. Options are:

- A car seat with a harness for a child over 40 pounds (picture, right). It is okay to install most car seats with only a lap belt, but it is much safer to also use a tether. Some require a tether at higher child weights.
- A vest or harness for children over 40 pounds. These require a tether strap to be used.

**Using Seat Belts Correctly**

**When your child is big enough**, teach him how to wear the seat belt correctly. (Adults need to buckle up correctly, too.)

**Lap belt fit is most important.** The belt must be low and tight, touching the top of the thighs. Teach your child to push the lap belt down and make it snug (picture, below).

It is hard to keep the lap belt snug and low if a child is wearing a heavy jacket. Either pull the jacket up so the lap belt goes under it or open the jacket and pull it to the sides.

**A lap-shoulder belt gives much better protection** than only a lap belt. The shoulder belt should cross the middle of the shoulder.

- Make sure your child does not put the shoulder belt behind her back or under her arm. That can cause very serious injury.
- Some cars have built-in shoulder belt height adjusters (see the owner’s manual). These make the shoulder belt fit better. Avoid using shoulder belt adjusters bought from a store. They do not have crash safety standards. They often make the seat belt too loose or the lap belt too high. This can cause serious injury.

**Air Bag Warning**

In a crash, the impact of the air bag can injure or kill a child. Never put a rear-facing car seat in front of an active air bag.

It is always safer in the rear. If you cannot avoid putting a forward-facing child in front, make sure the car seat harness or the shoulder belt is snug. Move the vehicle seat all the way back.

A sports car or pickup truck with no back seat or a very small back seat may have a switch or sensor that turns the front air bag off. Make sure the air bag is turned off before putting a child in front. (Turn it on again for adult passengers.)

- If there are side air bags in the back seat, make sure your child does not lean against the side of the car.

**Check the manual for more information about air bags.**

**Resources**

- The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia: www.chop.edu/carseat

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