



## Keeping Child Passengers Safe

*By Melissa Savage*

*Car crashes are the leading cause of death for children over age 1.*

Six American children die and 721 are injured in motor vehicle crashes every day; 2,095 children were killed in 2002. It is the leading cause of death for children over the age of 1. Children are at a much greater risk for death or injury when they ride unrestrained or improperly restrained in a child safety seat. More than half the children killed in crashes are totally unrestrained. When child safety seats are used correctly, they can reduce deaths by more than 70 percent for infants and by 54 percent for toddlers, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

*Child passenger laws vary and many contain gaps in coverage.*

All 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. territories have some form of child passenger law. The problem—according to traffic safety advocates—is that these laws vary in strength and many contain gaps in coverage. Some fail to cover all children in all seating positions. Other laws exempt out-of-state visitors, taxicabs and attending to a child's physical needs. NHTSA, AAA and other traffic safety advocates recommend that state child passenger laws cover all children up to age 16 in every seating position.

### Federal Action

NHTSA is required to issue federal motor vehicle safety standards and regulations. These are designed to ensure that manufacturers of motor vehicles and equipment build safe and reliable products. These federal requirements establish minimum safety standards for motor vehicles and motor vehicle equipment. Standard 213 covers child restraints and outlines requirements for child safety seats used in motor vehicles and airplanes.

*One major problem with child safety seats is incorrect installation.*

One major problem with child safety seats is incorrect installation. NHTSA estimates that more than 80 percent of seats are installed incorrectly. In an effort to make installation easier, NHTSA has issued regulations requiring standardized vehicle anchorage systems that are independent of vehicle seat belts. They require forward-facing child safety seats manufactured after Sept. 1, 1999, to have a top tether strap that attaches the back of the seat to the shelf behind the passenger car's rear seat or the seat back or the floor of a van or SUV. New vehicles and child safety seats were required by Sept. 1, 2002, to be equipped with LATCH systems, which include two lower anchorage points and top tether systems installed in the back two seating positions in all cars, minivans and light trucks.

### State Action

*Many states have considered requiring the use of booster seats.*

**Booster Seats.** Most child passenger laws cover children at least up to age 4 or 40 pounds. It was once thought that children over age 4 or weighing more than 40 pounds would be safe riding secured by an adult-sized safety belt. Recent studies show that children are not able to ride safely that way until they are older and bigger. For that reason, many states have consid-

ered legislation requiring the use of booster seats for older children. Booster seats are designed for children who weigh more than 40 pounds. NHTSA recommends that all children who have outgrown child safety seats be properly restrained in booster seats until they reach age 8, unless they are 4'9" or taller. NHTSA estimates that less than 10 percent of children who should be in a booster seat actually are.

Twenty-two states plus Washington, D.C., have booster seat requirements. These laws vary greatly in how they determine when a child should be seated in a booster seat and when the child can make the move to a seat belt. The laws use a combination of age, height and/or weight to make the determination.

**Air Bags.** Another area of concern is air bags. Along with the use of safety belts, air bags are an effective way to save lives in front-end motor vehicle crashes. Although air bags have successfully saved thousands of lives, they also have caused many injuries and deaths. The impact often is what causes the injuries and deaths among unrestrained adults or children. A simple solution to this potential danger is to have everyone buckle up and ensure that all children ride in the back seat.

Delaware is one state with a law to address the risk of air bags. Children under age 12 who are 65 inches or shorter are required to ride in the back seat of vehicles equipped with passenger-side front air bags. North Carolina and Washington have similar laws. In North Carolina, children under age 5 who weigh less than 40 pounds must be seated in a child safety seat in the rear seat if the vehicle has a passenger-side air bag. Washington's law requires children under age 6 or who weigh less than 60 pounds to be seated in a child safety seat in the back seat of vehicles equipped with passenger-side air bags. California, Maine, New Jersey, New Mexico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee and Wyoming have laws requiring children of a certain age to ride in the rear seat of any vehicle whether it is equipped with air bags or not. NHTSA recommends that all children under age 13 ride in the back seat.

**Conclusion.** During the last few decades, motor vehicle fatality rates for children have decreased. Enforcement of child passenger laws and education can be credited for the steady decline. Although the decline is good news, thousands of children still are killed or injured each year in motor vehicle crashes. Appropriate use of child safety seats, booster seats and seat belts are the most effective way to cut down on the number of deaths and injuries to children.

### Contacts for More Information

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### Booster Seat Requirements

Arkansas  
California  
Colorado  
Delaware  
District of Columbia  
Illinois  
Louisiana  
Maryland  
Maine  
Montana  
Nebraska  
Nevada  
New Hampshire  
New Jersey  
Oregon  
Pennsylvania  
Rhode Island  
South Carolina  
Tennessee  
Vermont  
Virginia  
Washington  
Wyoming

*Booster seats are designed for children who weigh more than 40 pounds.*

*Air bags have caused many injuries and deaths.*

*NHTSA recommends that all children under age 13 ride in the back seat.*

*Appropriate use of child safety seats, booster seats and seat belts are the best way to protect children.*