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Our Pediatrician weighs in on car safety

Written by Board Certified Pediatrician

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One of the biggest challenges to parenting is keeping children safe. This is even more important in the car, where so many things can happen so quickly. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading killer of children older than one year, and proper use of car safety seats is a crucial factor in protecting your children. In fact, car seats reduce the risk of death by 71% for infants, and 54% for toddlers ages one

to four. However, there may be more to the issue than you think.

According to a recommendation from the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2011, infants and toddlers should ride in rear-facing car seats until they are two years old. A rear-facing car seat is much more effective at supporting and cushioning the head, neck, and spine in the event of a crash, because the force of the collision is distributed across the entire body. One study showed that if children younger than two are in rear-facing car seats, their risk of being severely injured in a crash drops by 75%.

When buckling in your infant or toddler, pay attention to the tightness of the straps. You should be able to slide only one finger underneath the strap. Make sure the shoulder straps are adjusted to the slots that are at (or just above) your child's shoulders. Check for large gaps between your child's bottom and the strap between the legs. Additionally, be careful of bulky clothing. It's better to dress your child lightly and cover the car seat with a blanket, rather than let bulky clothing get in the way of the straps. Large snowsuits or winter jackets can

interfere with the proper fit a child needs to stay safest in a car seat.

The earliest car seat you will deal with is an infant car seat, one to take your child home from the hospital. These seats have handles and can be used inside and outside the vehicle. Eventually, children will outgrow their infant car seats, and each manufacturer has different maximum height and weight allowances – be sure to check your car seats to keep your kid in the right size seat!

Once a child has outgrown the infant seat, they should continue to ride rear-facing in either a convertible seat or 3-in-1 seat until they are two years old. After that, rear-facing convertible seats can be “converted” to forward-facing. The 3-in-1 seat can also serve as a booster seat as your child grows older. No matter the design, your child should use some form of the 5-point harness buckle until they are at least four years old and weigh at least 40 pounds.

Always refer to your specific car seat manufacturer's instructions and your vehicle owner's manual for proper installation of car seats. Most newer vehicles have a system called LATCH, which stands for Lower Anchors and



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Tethers for Children. The LATCH system makes it easier to install car seats – make sure to use the top tether for forward-facing car seats.

When shopping for a car seat, keep several things in mind. The best car seat is the one that fits your child, fits your vehicle, and is used properly every time you drive. You don't need to buy the most expensive car seat, but several factors can affect safety. Avoid used seats if you don't know the car seat's history, and never use a car seat that has been in an accident. Also, it is possible for a car seat to expire: the plastic in older car seats can crack and be unsafe. And, finally, car seats are sometimes recalled by the factory. Always double-check for these factors when purchasing a car seat.

Children who have outgrown traditional car seats still need booster seats for

seat belt positioning until they are both eight years old and at least 4'9" tall. These booster seats can reduce the risk of serious injury by 45% for children between four and eight. The goal of a booster seat is to keep the vehicle's seat belt in safe areas across a child's body: the shoulder belt should lie across the middle of the chest and shoulder, not near the neck or face. The lap belt should fit low and snug on the hips and upper thighs, not across the belly. Even once your child is big enough to use the seat belts normally, they should always ride in the back seat until the age of 13.

As your child gets older, he or she will begin to understand seat belts. It is your job to encourage seat belt safety. Always wear your own seat belt to be a good role model for your child, and emphasize that everybody needs to wear a seat

belt. Children at this age will often try to unbuckle themselves: use this as an opportunity to stop the car, showing your child that if the car is moving, they must be buckled in. It cannot be stressed enough that seat belts are crucial for car safety – and not just for children!

If you are ever uncertain about your child's safety in the car, don't hesitate to ask your pediatrician. Some aspects of car safety for children may seem strange or inconvenient, but you shouldn't ever miss an opportunity to give your child better odds of safety in a motor vehicle. We cannot protect our children from everything in this world, but there are factors we can control. As parents behind the wheel, the least we can do is make sure our children are safely strapped in for the ride.

For more information or to schedule an appointment please call 605-665-5538.