



Newer child safety seat guidelines

Parents of young children may need to brush up on their knowledge of child safety seats and seat belt restraints. Many are still operating in adherence to older guidelines that go back more than a decade. As a result, parents should re-educate themselves in order to ensure child safety.

In guidelines published in April of 2011, the American Academy of Pediatrics made some modifications to the period of time a child should be kept in a rear-facing seat. Prior to 2011, parents were told it was safest for infants and toddlers to ride rear-facing up to the limits of the car seat or when children reached 12 months in age and 20 pounds. But new guidelines advise that children should be kept rear-facing until age 2, or until they reach the maximum height and weight for their seat.

"A rear-facing child safety seat does a better job of supporting the head, neck and spine of infants and toddlers in a crash, because it distributes the force of the collision over the entire body," says Dennis Durbin, MD, FAAP, the lead author of the new policy.

Transport Canada says children should be kept in rear-facing seats until they outgrow them. There are some rear-facing seats that will accommodate children up to 20 kg (40

pounds). As long as the child is still below the weight and height limit of the current child seat, they should continue to face the back of the car.

Rear-facing seat recommendations weren't the only ones to be modified in 2011. New advice on booster seats for older children were also presented. The AAP and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration say children should ride in a belt-positioning booster -- which is the high-back booster seat that provides a guide for the vehicle's seat belt -- until they are at least 4 feet, 9 inches and between 8 to 12 years old.

Vehicle seat belts are designed to fit an average adult. In order to get the best protection, children usually need a booster seat until they are about 4 feet 9 inches tall and weigh between 80 to 100 pounds. Smaller children may need to remain in a booster a little longer than anticipated.

Transport Canada advises that as long as a child still fits within the manufacturer's weight and height limits for the booster seat, it is safer for the child to remain in the booster seat rather than wear a regular seat belt. Canadians also are urged to check with their province or territory for specific laws concerning when a child can move to a seat belt.

Children should not ride in the front seat of a car until they are age 13 or older. Parents of preteens who were under the impression that booster seat days were coming to an end will need to keep the safety seats in the car a few years longer. But safety seats should not be placed in an area of the car where an air bag can be deployed.

Parents and other adult drivers may want to heed some other safety precautions before a child is upgraded to a new seat.

- * A seat belt should never be placed under a child's arm.
- * Children should always be buckled up in a booster seat with both the shoulder and lap belt.
- * The seat belt should fall across the shoulders and the lap belt should rest on the upper thighs when a child is in the seat of a car. If the seat belt rubs against the neck, the child is not yet tall enough to give up a booster seat.
- * Mirrors placed in the rear seat of the car can help parents see their children in rear-facing toddler seats.
- * Children who cannot be trusted to keep a seat belt latched should not be moved from a five-point harness to a regular seat belt.
- * Parents unsure if their children are buckled up correctly can have the seat checked at a police station or first aid building.

Keeping children safe means heeding warnings and guidelines regarding safety restraints. It is not advisable to upgrade a child into the next seat until he or she has met all the measurement requirements set in place.

Car seat expiration

In addition to using the right car seat for a child's age, weight and height, drivers should also be aware to check the expiration dates of seats they already have. While a car seat will not grow moldy after a few years, it does "expire," meaning it is no longer deemed safe for use. That's because these seats are not built to last forever. Hairline cracks may form in the plastic, and the harness belts may become stretched or more elastic after years of use. Manufacturers do not test safety seats after a certain period of time, so they cannot state how they will perform in an accident after many years. Most seats will feature a label on the bottom that indicates when the seat is likely to become unsafe -- typically between five and six years after manufacture. It can be tempting to borrow a used car seat from a friend or family member to save money, but if the seat is older parents could be putting children at risk.

■ HEADLAMPS

From Page 14

* Think ahead. In addition to addressing existing issues, drivers can take steps to ensure their nighttime visibility is protected over the long haul. The Philips Headlight Restoration Kit, for example, employs a protective UV coating that can prevent future clouding for up to two years. In addition to addressing the headlamps, consider how your visibility is likely to be affected during the worst possible snowstorm or on a night with torrential rains. Keep those conditions in mind when deciding whether or not to hang any fuzzy dice or other trinkets from your rearview mirror. While such items can add a touch of personality to your vehicle, the decreased visibility

such items can cause is not worth the cost over the long haul.

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