



A GAP

IN CHILD SEAT SAFETY

By Adam J. Langino and Leslie M. Kroeger

Motor vehicle injuries are a leading cause of death among children in the United States. In 2014, 603 children ages 12 years and younger died as occupants in motor vehicle crashes, and more than 121,350 were injured. However, using age and size appropriate car seats, booster seats, and seat belts reduces the risk of serious and fatal injuries to children.¹ The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is the United States' Federal agency responsible for reducing deaths, injuries and the economic losses associated with crashes by setting and enforcing safety performance standards for motor vehicles and motor vehicle equipment like car seats and booster seats.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and NHTSA recommend as a best practice that children between the ages of four and seven be kept in a forward facing car seat until they reach the top height or weight limit allowed by the specific car seat's manufacturer. Only once a child outgrows a forward facing car seat is a child ready to be put into a booster seat, which is only meant to help an adult seat belt fit better. Despite the grave consequences, some child seat manufacturers still recommend booster seats for smaller children against the best practice recommendations of the NHTSA, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, contributing to a gap in child safety.

A "booster seat" is a seat used to elevate a child so that a vehicle's integrated lap and shoulder belt will fit a child more appropriately. A booster seat is considered the last step prior to transitioning a child to

adult lap and shoulder belt use. Prior to being placed in a booster seat, a child is typically buckled into a forward facing child restraint system. Practically all forward facing child restraint systems incorporate a five point harness that has straps that secure at the shoulders, across the upper thighs, and between the passenger's legs. Forward facing child restraint systems are attached to a motor vehicle through an upper tether and either internal latches or the vehicle's lap and shoulder belt system. Booster seats gained popularity in the United States after NHTSA required automakers to incorporate outboard rear passenger lap/shoulder combination seat belts in their vehicles. Prior to the introduction of booster seats, many children were placed in lap/shoulder combination belts that did not fit them. The booster seat, therefore, was helpful in preventing injuries in children that were too large for forward facing child restraint systems but too small to be placed in a combination lap/shoulder belt system. Studies have shown that children seated in a booster seat are 45 percent less likely to be injured a crash than children using a combination lap/shoulder belt alone.

While a booster seat provides a safety advantage over combination shoulder/lap belt use, forward facing child restraint systems are generally considered the better option for smaller children who have not outgrown their use. Unlike booster seats, forward facing child restraint systems are affixed to a motor vehicle, thereby preventing the seat's forward movement in the event of a crash. Further, the five point restraint makes it much less likely that a child will be ejected and eliminates the chance that the motor vehicle's shoulder belt will impact the child's neck or the lap belt will harm the child's abdomen.



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As stated by the American Academy of Pediatrics, “[t]here is a safety advantage for young children to remain in a [child restraint system] with a harness for as long as possible before transitioning to booster seats.”

It is for those reasons, and others, that the leading authorities on child safety seats are uniform that a booster seat should only be used when a child exceeds the upper weight limits of an available forward facing child restraint system. For instance, NHTSA recommends that a child be kept in a forward facing child restraint system until he or she reaches the top height or weight limit allowed by the manufacturer. The American Academy of Pediatrics agrees that the “best practice” is to keep children in forward facing child restraint systems for as long as possible and that children should only be placed in a booster seat when they have outgrown their child restraint system. For many years, forward facing child restraint systems accommodated children up to forty pounds, but in the past decade safety advancements allow many forward facing child restraint systems for children upwards of 65 to 80 pounds.

Many design improvements to child safety seats have been made since NHTSA adopted the first federal standards in 1971, codified as Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Statute 213 (“FMVSS 213”). Yet, NHTSA’s testing criteria for booster seats remains imperfect. Dynamic safety testing standards intended for harnessed child restraint systems were added in 1981. Despite advancements in child seat technology, those standards have remained largely unchanged. Booster seats were not added to FMVSS 213 until 1994. Unbeknownst to parents, booster seats are tested to the same largely unchanged 1981 standards that were initially designed for harnessed child restraint systems. In fact, no specific standard in FMVSS 213 tests what a belt positioning booster is supposed to do; i.e., ensure that the vehicle’s lap shoulder belt is in the correct position.¹² Child seat companies know this, parents do not.

Despite the clear recommendations from the leading authorities that children remain in forward facing child restraint systems for as long as possible, some child seat manufacturers, in an effort to capture a larger market, advertise booster seats as safe for smaller children, in some instances for toddlers as young as one year old or that weigh as little as thirty pounds. The same companies that advertise booster seats as safe for smaller children in the United States are precluded from doing so in countries with more stringent safety requirements, such as Canada. Arguably, even some states, such as Alabama, Connecticut, Ohio, Oregon, and New Jersey, mandate that child restraint systems be used for smaller children and make it illegal to use booster seats for kids that weigh less than 40 pounds. The push by some booster seat companies to invite parents to prematurely graduate smaller children to their products has created a safety gap wherein those smaller children are at risk of ejection in car crashes and suffering catastrophic injuries as a result.

In an effort to boost their profits, child seat companies are marketing their booster seats as safe for smaller children and are needlessly putting families with smaller kids at risk. Only by holding them accountable will they be forced to market their booster seats in accordance with the best practice recommendations of NHTSA and leading safety agencies. Until then, a safety gap exists and children will continue to be injured. ■

¹ CDC. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System [online]. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (producer). [2016 Aug 16].

² National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Traffic safety facts, 2014 data: occupant protection. Washington, DC: US Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; 2016. Available at <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/812262.pdf>.

³ Durbin, D. R. (2011). Technical report—Child passenger safety. *Pediatrics*, 127(4). Advance online publication. doi:10.1542/peds.2011-0215.

⁴ Arbogast KB, Jermakian JS, Kallan MJ, Durbin DR. Effectiveness of belt positioning booster seats: an updated assessment. *Pediatrics* 2009;124;1281–6.

⁵ NHTSA Who we Are and What We Do. (2016) Retrieved on September 12, 2016 from <http://www.nhtsa.gov/About+NHTSA/Who+We+Are+and+What+We+Do>

⁶ Car Seat Recommendations for Children. (2016). Retrieved September 12, 2016 from <http://www.safercar.gov/parents/CarSeats/Right-Seat-Age-And-Size-Recommendations.htm?view=full>

⁷ NHTSA Standardized Child Passenger Safety Training Program, 2001. Safety Tips. (2016). Retrieved September 12, 2016, from http://www.safekids.org/safetytips/field_age/little-kids-1%E2%80%934-years/field_risks/car-seat

⁸ Durbin, D. R. (2011). Technical report—Child passenger safety. *Pediatrics*, 127(4). Advance online publication. doi:10.1542/peds.2011-0215.

⁹ NHTSA, B. (n.d.). Car Seat Recommendations for Children. Retrieved September 12, 2016, from <http://www.safercar.gov/parents/CarSeats/Right-Seat-Age-And-Size-Recommendations.htm?view=full>

¹⁰ Durbin, D. R. (2011). Technical report—Child passenger safety. *Pediatrics*, 127(4). Advance online publication. doi:10.1542/peds.2011-0215.

¹¹ Governors Highway Safety Association Child Passenger Safety Law. (2016). Retrieved 9/12/2016, from http://www.ghsa.org/html/stateinfo/laws/childsafety_laws.html

¹² Insurance Institute for Highway Safety Highway Data Loss Institute. (2010). More boosters earn top ratings for belt fit, but most still don’t. Status Report, Vol. 45, no. 9. Page 2

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