

Does Your Child Need a Booster Seat?

Young children who are placed in vehicle belts rather than booster seats are 59% more likely to suffer devastating injuries, including severe damage to the brain, liver, spleen, and spinal cord. Most children need to use a booster seat from about age four until age 10-12 for maximum protection and improved comfort in the car.

Q My child is five years old. Isn't she old enough to use a regular safety belt now?

A No. Vehicle seats and belts are designed for adult bodies. For children who have outgrown a safety seat with a harness, a booster seat is needed to keep the lap belt on the upper thighs and the shoulder belt centered on the shoulder and chest.

Q Why is it important for children who have outgrown car seats to use boosters?

A Children over four have a higher rate of injury than younger children for several reasons. Many of them place the shoulder belt under the arm or behind the back. They tend to ride out of position, either sliding forward to the edge of the vehicle seat or slouching downward. Fewer children in this age group are buckled up, perhaps because vehicle seats and belts are not comfortable for them.

Q How can I tell when my child has outgrown his car seat?

A Children should ride in a safety seat with a complete harness system as long as possible. Most seats with a harness fit children up to 40 pounds, but a tall, thin child may be too tall for a "convertible" seat, the type that faces either rearward or forward, before reaching the maximum weight. If the child's shoulders are above the top slots, try a combination child seat/booster with higher strap slots. The harness may be used up to 40 pounds or more, depending on the model. The harness is then removed, and the seat can be used as a belt-positioning booster up to 80 pounds or more.

Q What about children who outgrow their safety seats before age four?

A Most 2-year-olds and many 3-year-olds are too immature to sit still in a booster with a lap and shoulder belt, which allows them to lean forward or sideways. Parents should consider getting a larger seat or a harness system for younger or more active children who outgrow their safety seats.

Q What about cars with only lap belts in the back seat?

A Never use a booster with only a lap belt! Although two shoulder belts have been required in vehicle back seats since 1989, many families have cars with lap-only belts in the center or older cars with no rear shoulder belts. Call SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. or go to www.carseat.org for information about safety seats to fit larger children (#627).

Q Should I use a booster with a shield or get one of those adjusters that attaches to the belt?

A None of the boosters with shields pass current federal safety standards for children over 40 pounds. Belt-positioning devices, such as clips or fabric sleeves that connect the shoulder and lap portions of the belt, are not required to meet federal safety standards. Tests by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration showed that they reduced effectiveness of the shoulder belt. They also tend to pull the lap portion of the belt up on the soft tummy area.

Q How can I tell when my child is big enough to use the vehicle belt without a booster?

A It depends on the height of the child, the shape of the vehicle seat, and where the belts are attached to the vehicle. The shoulder belt should cross the center of the shoulder and chest. The lap portion of the belt should be low and snug, crossing the hip bones or upper thighs. Check that your child's legs are long enough so the knees bend comfortably at the edge of the seat. Otherwise, the child will tend to slide forward to the edge of the seat or slouch downward, which can cause the lap belt to ride up too high. Make sure the child sits up straight, with the entire back touching the vehicle seatback, and stays properly seated **throughout the trip.**

Try the 5-Step Test to find out if your child needs a booster seat.

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