

Give Your Child a Back Seat for Safety – Why It's Important to Keep Children in the Back until Age 13

As parents, it is very tempting to reward children by letting them sit up front in the vehicle just like grown-ups do. But, the fact is that the front seat is engineered with safety features to protect adults, and children are not small adults. Even children, whom when we observe them from the outside may be as big or even bigger than their parents, are not as strong and well developed as their parents on the inside. Until a child reaches age 13, their bones are not fully developed. They do not have a mature skeleton that can take the forces of the most common type of automobile crash, which is a frontal crash. Placing a child whose bones are not strong enough yet in the front seat, where there is the windshield, dashboard, and air bags, puts them at greater risk of injury or death during a crash.

The hip bone, which helps keep the lap belt low and away from the abdominal cavity, where there is soft tissue and vital organs, is not fully developed until closer to age 13. The breast bone, also referred to as the sternum, is not strong enough to take crash forces or the impact of a frontal air bag. The lap/shoulder belt and air bag is designed to save the lives of adults in the front seat. It is not designed to properly protect children under age 13 — and it can actually cause more harm rather than protect them.

Over the last two decades, vehicles have added features to the front seat to protect adult passengers. A recent study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, looking at the safety of the back seat for adult passengers, shows that the safety features that have been added to the front seat — including air bags and crumple zones — have significantly increased crash protection for front passengers to the point where it may be safer for adults to ride in the front. That was not the case for older vehicles when riding in the front, which put vehicle occupants closer to where most crashes were happening and did not provide the extra protection that modern cars have. Another reason that the rear seat may no longer be the safest place for adults is that many adults do not wear seat belts in the back seat and there are no warnings from the vehicle to remind rear passengers to buckle up.

However, the rear seat still remains the safest place for children to ride. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under age 13 be seated in the rear, citing a higher risk of injury and more severe injuries to children seated in the front seat. While children age 12 and younger account for 56 percent of passengers who sit in the back of vehicles, they are only part of 24 percent of crash fatalities, according to a recent study by the IIHS and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia that reviewed U.S. crashes between 2007 and 2012.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Passenger Safety and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Community Health Educator, Kay Rogers, from Dallam & Hartley Counties, reminds parents and caregivers to keep children under age 13 properly buckled up and in the back seat to increase their chances of surviving a crash.

Follow these best practice recommendations to keep children riding safely:

1. All infants and toddlers should ride in a rear-facing car seat until they are at least 2-years-old; or until they reach the highest weight or height allowed by the manufacturer of their child safety seat.
2. Children who have outgrown the rear-facing weight or height limit for their car seat should use a forward-facing seat with a harness for as long as possible — up to the highest weight or height allowed by the manufacturer.

3. All children whose weight or height is above the forward-facing limit for their car seat should use a belt-positioning booster seat until the vehicle lap-and-shoulder seat belt fits properly. Typically, this happens sometime between 8 and 12 years of age.
4. When children are old enough and large enough to use the vehicle seat belt alone, they should always use lap-and-shoulder seat belts for optimal protection.
5. Remember: All child passengers under age 13 should ride securely restrained in the back seat, where they are safest — every trip, every time.

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