

# Baby's First Road Trip:

## Safety First!



**The best child safety seat is the one that fits your baby, fits your vehicle, and will be used correctly every trip.**

### Used or New?

From diapers to doctor's visits and everything in between, babies can be expensive. It can be tempting to want to save money with a used child safety seat. Although not everything for your baby has to be new, remember that this is safety equipment. Stay away from used seats at online auction sites, yard sales, and thrift stores. You don't know who owned the seat or how they treated it. But, if the used seat comes from your own family or a trusted friend, it might be okay to use, if you take time to check the following:

- **Know the history of the seat.** Has it been in a crash? How were the padding, harness, and buckle cleaned? If anyone used harsh chemicals or put them in the dryer, it could have removed the flame-retardant properties or made the straps weaker.
- **Make sure the seat is complete,** including its instruction booklet. Ask the previous owner whether any pieces were removed, and check the list of parts in the instruction booklet. Can you see damage to the frame of the seat or its straps? Are all the labels still attached?
- **Consider the age of the seat.** Although it met federal safety standards when it first came out, current standards are somewhat stricter. Call the manufacturer to find out how long they recommend using that seat.
- **Call the manufacturer's 1-800 number** (listed on the labels) to check for any recalls.

*You've taken extra care for nine months to protect your baby. Now it's time to protect him from one of the most dangerous times of his day—riding in a vehicle.*

**Selecting a Seat** Every time your baby rides in a car, make sure she's in a child safety seat appropriate for her age and size. Check the labels. Most seats fit babies 5 pounds and up, but some seats start at birth or 4 pounds. The best child safety seat is the one that fits your baby, fits your vehicle, and will be used correctly every trip.

There are three main types of safety seats for infants and young children. Many people find *rear-facing-only seats* convenient because of their light weight and carry handles. A *convertible seat* is another option that may be used rear-facing for younger children and converted to forward-facing for older children. Convertible seats fit most children up to 50 pounds. A *3-in-1 seat* may be used as an infant seat, then as a convertible seat, and later changed to a booster seat when your child reaches the maximum harness weight recommended by the manufacturer. A special car bed is an option if your infant has a medical need to lie flat when riding. Your doctor will tell you if this is the case.

**Placing a Seat in Your Vehicle** The safest place for your child is in the back seat. However, if your vehicle doesn't have a back seat, you can place your child safety seat in the front as long as you can turn off the passenger-side airbag. NEVER place a rear-facing seat in front of an active airbag. If you're not sure if your vehicle has a passenger air bag, check your vehicle owner's manual or sun visor, or look for letters such as "SRS" embossed somewhere on the dashboard.

*All infant child safety seats must be installed facing the rear of your vehicle.* Even convertible seats must be installed facing the rear until your baby is old enough and large enough to face forward (see "Things You Should Know" for more information). It's also important that the child safety seat be reclined at the correct angle. If the seat is too upright, a very young baby's head may fall forward and restrict his breathing. Many infant seats have adjustable bases so you can change the angle. Otherwise, you can put a tightly rolled towel or a foam pool noodle cut to the length of the base under the foot of the child safety seat to adjust the angle. Don't recline the seat more than 45 degrees, since that could keep the seat from protecting the baby in a crash.

**Installing the Seat** LATCH – Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children – is a way to install child safety seats without using the seat belt. Most new vehicles have LATCH in at least two seating positions, but it's not always in the middle of the back seat. Check your vehicle owner's manual to locate any LATCH anchors in your vehicle.

If you don't have LATCH, you can still install your baby's seat safely with a seat belt. Just make sure the belt "locks" the child safety seat in place. Some seat belts lock automatically. On others, you pull the seat belt all the way out to lock it. Some seat belts need an extra piece of hardware to make them lock. Check your vehicle owner's manual to find out how your seat belts work.

Whether you use LATCH or the seat belt, make sure your baby's seat is tightly installed. Put your hands near the seat belt openings on the sides of the safety seat, and pull the seat side-to-side and front-to-back. The safety seat shouldn't move more than an inch.

**Positioning Your Child** The straps that hold your baby in her seat are called the *harness*. Make sure the harness straps over her shoulders don't come out of the back of the seat *above* her shoulders. If they do, check the instructions to find out how to lower the harness. Those straps should begin at or slightly below her shoulders to hold her safely in a rear-facing seat.

Also, the harness should be snug so you can't pinch any extra webbing. Test it at the baby's collarbone. Move the plastic retainer clip so it's across the chest – about armpit level. This keeps the straps in the correct position so they won't slide off the baby's shoulders.

*Don't put anything under your baby or between his body and the harness.* Even a heavy coat could keep the harness from doing its job in a crash. Instead, you can fill in extra space *around* the baby by placing rolled receiving blankets along both of his sides (as illustrated) and a rolled washcloth between his legs and the crotch strap. You can also put a blanket on top of the harness to keep him warm.

**Things You Should Know** All infants and toddlers should ride rear-facing in a safety seat until they are 2 years of age or until they reach the highest weight or height allowed by their safety seat manufacturer. Rear-facing is safest because it helps protect your child from spinal cord injuries in a crash. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children ride rear-facing as long as possible – until they reach the upper weight limits of the seat. Some seats allow for rear-facing to 40 pounds. Be mindful of the seat's height limits. Your child is usually too tall for the seat if the top of her head is within an inch of the top of the child safety seat.

Georgia law requires children under the age of 8 to ride in a child safety seat appropriate for their height and weight (with some exceptions) and used according to the manufacturer's instructions. However, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children continue riding in child safety seats or boosters even longer. Most children don't fit into seat belts until they're about 4'9" tall, and between 8 and 12 years old. Make sure you and other adults wear seat belts to set a good example, and to keep you safe too. An unsecured passenger can cause injury to others in a crash.

**The Bottom Line** After you unpack your new safety seat, do what many parents don't: read the owner's manual for the car seat and your vehicle. *Eight out of 10 child safety seats are installed incorrectly.* Make sure yours isn't one of them!

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## HELPFUL RESOURCES

For more information on child safety seats, go to the American Academy of Pediatrics Web site: [www.aap.org/family/carseatguide.htm](http://www.aap.org/family/carseatguide.htm)

You can also have your seat inspected by a certified Child Passenger Safety Technician. Go to <http://cert.safekids.org> and click the "Find a Technician" link or call toll-free 866-SEATCHECK (866-732-8243) to locate a child safety seat inspection station and set up an installation appointment.

If you have questions, please contact us at the UGA Traffic Injury Prevention Institute: **1-800-342-9819** or [www.ridesafegeorgia.org](http://www.ridesafegeorgia.org)

## From the **Guide for New Parents**

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