

♦ ***“Is your infant/child in the appropriate seat for his/her size?”***

Each child restraint device is manufactured to accommodate children within specified weight and height guidelines. If your child doesn't fall within the recommended ranges for your particular seat, she or he may not receive the greatest possible safety benefits from that seat. Know your child's exact weight and height, and check the instruction booklet, to be sure the seat fits the child.

♦ ***“Are the harness straps threaded through the correct slots in the back of the child safety seat?”***

In most cases, the harness straps of the child seat should be threaded through the harness slots located **at or just below shoulder level** for rear-facing infants, and **at or just above shoulder level** for forward-facing children. *READ your instruction manual to be sure!*

♦ ***“Are the harness straps snug?”***

They should rest flat against your child's body, with *no slack* - your child should not be able to move his or her shoulders away from the child seat shell - nor should they be so tight as to cause the child discomfort. The harness retainer clip, which holds the two harness straps in position on your child's shoulders, should be placed at armpit level.

♦ ***“Is the child safety seat installed tightly enough in your vehicle?”***

Here's how to test for a tight child seat: Grasp the seat on either side, at the point where the vehicle safety belt or LATCH belt is threaded through the belt path. Tug the child seat firmly away from the vehicle seat, then tug it from side to side. Does the child seat move more than one inch away from the car seat? More than one inch from side to side? If it does, the installation is not tight enough. To the right is a drawing which demonstrates how to better tighten a child safety seat in place. Note that the parent is **compressing** the child seat into the car seat (placing her knee in the child seat and leaning into it with her body



weight) while pulling hard on the loose end of the vehicle seat belt **at the same time**. (This technique works even better if you use a partner!)

There are thousands of possible combinations of child safety seats and vehicle seats, and many of those combinations are not compatible. This means a parent or caregiver may find it difficult or impossible to install a child safety seat properly, even with the help of the vehicle owner's manual and the child seat instruction booklet. Fortunately, there are places to go for assistance from trained child passenger safety professionals. Several are listed below.

♦ ***“Has your child's safety seat been recalled?”***

Just as automobiles and many other products may be “recalled” for a variety of defects, so may child safety seats. When you hear about a recall, determine which make, model and manufacturing date(s) are affected, then call the manufacturer's customer service number for further information.

If you're not sure whether or not your CSS has been recalled, or you don't know the correct phone number for the manufacturer, call the **U.S. DOT's Auto Safety Hotline** in Washington, D.C., toll-free, at **1-888-DASH-2-DOT**. Before you call, write down the brand, model number and manufacturing date of your child seat. This information is printed on labels affixed to the seat. (If necessary, check under the padding and other less obvious places for the labels.) Bring the seat to the phone so you can answer questions about it.

To review a list of certified child passenger safety technicians and child safety seat checkup events in your area, contact the New York State Governor's Traffic Safety Committee at **(518) 474-5111**, or browse to their website (www.safenyny.gov). The New York State Police also retains a staff of certified CPS technicians throughout the State; to contact the one nearest you, call **(518) 457-3258**. Finally, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration also maintains a website (www.nhtsa.dot.gov) listing certified child passenger safety technicians and other useful resources.



Child Safety Seats

Use and Misuse



**Provided by the
New York State Police**

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death and injury for children from 2 to 14 years old in the United States. In 2003, motor vehicles crashes claimed the lives of 1,591 child passengers from birth to age 14, and injured 220,000 more! According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, if all child passengers under age 5 were properly restrained in the car, more than 500 lives could be saved *each year*.

New York's occupant restraint law requires that children **under the age of 4** be restrained in appropriate, federally-approved child restraint devices. Children less than 4 who weigh more than 40 pounds may be secured in a booster seat **with a lap/shoulder safety belt**. Children ages 4, 5 and 6 must be secured in an appropriate child seat or booster seat, unless they're more than 4'9" tall or weigh more than 100 pounds. From the age of 7 until they reach their 16th birthday, children must continue to be belted in when they ride in the back seat. It is estimated that more than one-third of young children in this country still ride unrestrained in motor vehicles. In addition, indications are that at least 80 percent of the child safety seats in use in this country are incorrectly installed and/or used. Based upon the results of child safety seat checks conducted across New York State in the last year, the "misuse rate" is actually much higher -- more than 90 percent!

WHAT IS "MISUSE," AND WHY IS IT SO WIDESPREAD?

Misuse of child safety seats can be found everywhere in society. There is no link between the likelihood of misuse and a parent's education or income. ALL misuse has the potential to endanger children, and should be corrected. The most serious examples of misuse render a child seat virtually useless, and can result in a child's death or serious injury. These include:

- ❖ Not securing the child in the child seat;
- ❖ Not anchoring the child seat with the appropriate vehicle restraint or LATCH system;
- ❖ Turning an infant to face forward in a vehicle;
- ❖ Seating an infant in front of an active air bag.

Other types of misuse also may lead to serious injury or death. These include:

- ❖ Using the wrong kind of restraint for your child (for example, placing a child in "adult" safety belts prematurely);
- ❖ Using the child seat's harness incorrectly;
- ❖ Failing to properly tighten the safety belt through or around the child safety seat;
- ❖ Incorrectly threading the safety belt or LATCH attachment belt through the child seat;
- ❖ Reclining a child too much or too little - especially a rear-facing infant, who must be reclined in accordance with the child seat manufacturer's guidelines.

Even seemingly "minor" usage or installation errors can be serious or life-threatening if not corrected. For example:

- ❖ Failing to put the harness retainer clip at chest level, to keep the harness straps on the child's shoulders;
- ❖ Permitting excess slack in the harness straps;
- ❖ Knotting the harness (which can reduce its strength);
- ❖ Re-using a child seat that has been in a serious crash.

As you can imagine, multiple errors increase the risk to the child. Data collected from numerous child seat checks throughout New York State and elsewhere indicate that the vast majority of child seats checked feature **two or more** examples of misuse.

In spite of the thousands of potential combinations of child safety seats and automobile models, there is no "secret" to correcting misuse. The two best sources of information available to you are your vehicle owner's manual and the instructions that came with your child safety seat.

HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD SEAT IS INSTALLED CORRECTLY?

With your vehicle owner's manual, the instruction manual for your child safety seat and a little homework, you have the tools you need to identify misuse and correct it! However, child passenger safety specialists see

many errors of misuse repeated over and over, so here are a few common mistakes to check for:

◆ **Does your car have a passenger-side air bag?**

If so, an infant in a rear-facing child safety seat must NEVER be placed in front of that air bag! Whenever possible, children should ride in the **back** seat. If toddlers **must** ride in the front seat of a vehicle with a passenger-side airbag, the vehicle seat should be moved as far away from the dashboard as possible, and the air bag should be **turned off**.

◆ **"Is your infant or child facing the correct way for both his/her age and weight?"**

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children should face the rear of the vehicle **until they are at least 1 year of age and weigh at least 20 pounds**, to decrease the risk of injury in the event of a crash. Infants who weigh 20 pounds before 1 year of age **should continue to ride rear-facing in a convertible seat or infant seat approved for higher weights until at least 1 year of age**. If a car safety seat accommodates children rear-facing to higher weights, for the best protection, the child **should remain rear facing until reaching the maximum weight for the car safety seat, as long as the top of the head is below the top of the seat back**.



This photograph clearly illustrates three common and potentially dangerous misuses. This infant has wrongly been turned to face forward, exposing her needlessly to harmful crash forces should a frontal collision occur. The car's safety belt is threaded through the wrong belt path of the CSS, contrary to instructions. Finally, the locking clip has been placed in the wrong location. ■

