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Judith A. Myers-Walls

Lori Goodwin

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Make Driving with Your Child a Safe and Pleasant Experience



by Judith A. Myers-Walls, Extension Specialist and Lori Goodwin, Instructor, Child Development and Family Studies, Purdue University

Beginning with the first ride home from the hospital, children spend a lot of time in cars. That time can be enjoyable and safe for the whole family, if parents help their children develop safe riding habits.

It Is the Law

In 1983, the Indiana State Legislature passed a law (effective Jan. 1, 1984) requiring all children under three to be seated in an approved car safety seat and children between the ages of three and five to be restrained in an approved car seat, booster seat, or seat belt while riding in a car or truck. The main concern of the lawmakers was reducing the number of injuries and deaths among children in car accidents, but there is another reason for parents to use car seats. Even if you never are involved in an accident with your child, you will benefit from using car seats. Each time you drive with your child appropriately buckled up, you probably will benefit from the child's controlled behavior.

Children's Behavior in Car Safety Seats

Parents often spend much of the time while they are driving trying to keep their children contented and still. One study showed that children who are not buckled up often crawl around in their seats, stand up, complain, get into fights, and play with the dashboard controls. In contrast, this study demonstrated that children who were buckled into car safety systems demonstrated 95 percent fewer incidents of misbehavior. Children are more likely to sleep and look around quietly when in car seats because they feel comfortable and safe.

Control of the child's behavior can make driving safer in addition to making the time more pleasant. Children who are not buckled up may be able to open the door of a moving car and fall out. Unrestrained children also can pull at the steering wheel or distract the driver. When children are buckled up properly, their parents spend less time scolding them and have more time to think about the road.

The children themselves benefit from riding in car seats, too. Car seats can be very comfortable, making them a good place to sleep. In addition, car seats and booster seats place children in a riding position that allows them to see out the windows without standing up and crawling around. Looking out the windows is much more interesting than looking at door panels or the dashboard.

Another major benefit for children is that car seats limit the amount of mischief children can get into in the car. Car seats help children to behave appropriately, making interactions with their parents more positive. Positive interactions with parents help children to feel good about themselves, which makes time spent in the car pleasant for the whole family.

Most Important—Safety

Of course, the most important reason for using a car safety system is safety. Automobile accidents are the number one preventable cause of death in American children. Each year 1,500 children under the age of five are killed in auto accidents and 60,000 more are injured. It is estimated that if all children rode properly restrained, the number of annual deaths of children under five would drop from 1500 to 150 and the number of injuries from 60,000 to 1,800. A child riding unrestrained in a car is 14 times more likely to be killed in a crash than a child who is secured in a safety device.

Selection and Use of Car Safety System

The first step in using a car safety seat for your child is to choose the right type of system. There are four major categories of car safety systems:

- Infant seats. These seats are designed for infants who cannot sit up alone and who have limited head control. They face backwards. Many of these seats may be converted to toddler seats.
- Toddler seats. These seats face forward and allow the child more freedom of movement. Children may begin using these seats at around 17 to 20 pounds, depending on the manufacturer's guidelines.
- Booster seats. These seats are for children who weigh 20-65 pounds. A special harness is required for some booster seats if shoulder straps are not available.
- Seat belts. When children weigh about 40 pounds and are about 40 inches tall, they can begin to use regular seat belts.

Seats can be bought in department, discount, or baby stores, or they can be rented from many hospitals or other organizations. If you buy a used seat, be sure the seat is in good condition and still safe. Many seats come with a list of replacement parts that may

A "child passenger restraint system" is defined as a device that "is manufactured for the purpose of protecting children from injury during a motor vehicle accident," and meets Federal Safety Standards.

A person who operates a motor vehicle in which there is a child less than three years of age who is not properly fastened and restrained by a child passenger restraint system commits a Class C infraction (punishable by a fine of up to \$500).

A person who operates a motor vehicle in which there is a child who is three

or four years of age who is not properly fastened and restrained by: (1) a child passenger restraint system; or (2) a seat belt, commits a Class C infraction (punishable by a fine of up to \$500).

Exemptions: School buses, taxicabs, rental vehicles (if rented for fewer than 30 days), ambulances, out-of-state vehicles (unless they are operated in Indiana for more than 60 days a year), and public passenger buses.

Fines will be waived if violators do not have previous violations and if they show proof of possession or acquisition of an approved system within 30 days.

be ordered to replace worn-out or outdated parts. Before you purchase either a new or used system, read the instructions carefully. Make sure the system (1) will fit in your car, (2) is the right size for your child, and (3) will be comfortable and easy to use. *Buy or rent the seat only if it meets Federal Safety Standards.*

The next challenge is to teach your child to ride in the seat. Children who have traveled in a safety seat since the first trip home from the hospital usually have no problems using a car seat as they get older. Around nine to twelve months when your baby starts to sit up without support, you may notice him or her fussing and straining more while in the seat. At this point babies can be moved from an infant seat to a toddler seat, where they can sit up and look around.

If your child has never ridden in a car seat, give him or her a chance to look at, touch, and explore the seat before having to ride in it. Keep rules about riding in the car short and simple. One important rule to set is that the car will not start unless everyone is buckled up. (This includes adults, too!) Another important rule is that everyone must stay buckled up as long as the car is moving.

Keep the reasons for buckling up simple. Some possible explanations are: "Car seats keep children safe and sound," or "If you are not in your seat, you could get hurt if I had to stop quickly." Point out the benefits for the children mentioned earlier, too. Remind the children, "When you sit in your seat, you can see out the window better," or "We have a nicer trip when you are in your seat, because we get along better." Do not try to scare children into riding restrained. Children can get needlessly frightened by lengthy descriptions of accidents and possible injuries.

If your child tries to avoid the car seat or tries to get out of the seat, immediately say, "No," in a firm voice. If the car is moving, stop as soon as it is safe and put the child back in the seat. It is very important that, no matter how much your child complains and fusses to get out of a car seat, you must not give in. When children are allowed to roam loose in the car even once, they will complain that much more the next time. Consistency is very important, and riding safely should be a 100 percent habit.

Other Ways to Help Children Behave Appropriately

- Be a good model; always buckle your own seat belt.
- Try to give your children frequent attention. Include the children in conversation while in the

car. Point out interesting things that they can see. Talk about what you're going to do once you arrive. Look for colors, letters or numbers on signs.

- Praise the children whenever possible for their good passenger behavior.
- Provide children with special quiet toys like paperback books or stuffed animals. Also do not forget to take along a favorite toy, security blanket, or pacifier.
- On longer trips, allow babies and children time to get out of the car, stretch, and change positions every hour or so.
- Remember to dress children for the temperature inside the car. Car seats can get quite warm.

For More Information

To find out what kind of car safety systems are available, where they can be purchased or rented, or to get further information, consult your local hospital or pediatrician, or contact one of the following organizations:

Indiana Child Passenger Safety Association
P.O. Box 40815—Indianapolis, IN 46240

National Child Passenger Safety Association
The University of North Carolina
Highway Safety Research Center, CTP-197-A
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

American Academy of Pediatrics
Office of Public Education
1801 Hinman Ave.—Evanston, IL 60204

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety
Watergate 600—Washington, D.C. 20037

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
General Services Division - NAD-42

United States Department of Transportation
400 7th Street, SW—Washington, D.C. 20590

Physicians for Automotive Safety
Communications Department
P.O. Box 208—Rye, NY 10580

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Hall, W.L., and Council, F.M., "Warning: In Cars, Children May Be Hazardous to Their Parents' Health: The Role of the Restraints in Preventing Collisions." *Proceedings of Twenty-fourth Annual Conference of the American Association for Automotive Medicine*, October 7-9, 1980. Morton Grove, IL: AAAM, 1980, pp. 132-146.

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