

# Car passenger safety



The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Melbourne 2008

- Motor vehicle accidents are the single biggest killer of children under 15 years of age.
- One in 15 people killed in Australia in 2005 in a motor-vehicle-related death was a child under the age of 16.

## Why use child restraints?

- Each year in Victoria, hundreds of children are killed or injured needlessly because they are either unrestrained or not restrained correctly.
- Most car crashes happen within 10 km of home
- About 70% of young children injured on the roads each year are passengers (*VicRoads*)
- Children need to be restrained even when travelling a short distance or at a low speed.
- The impact suffered by an unrestrained child in a car crash at 60 km/h is the same as falling from a fourth floor window onto concrete.

## The law:

Is the driver responsible for the passengers being properly restrained in a car?

By law, drivers are responsible for the safety of all passengers up to the age of 16. The penalties are an indexed on the spot fine of more than \$170 and three demerit points for every child not properly restrained.

The law states that children up to 12 months must be carried in an approved restraint. The restraint must carry an Australian Standards AS 1754 sticker; be suitable for the child's size and weight; be properly fitted to the vehicle and adjusted to fit the child's body. As children of the same age can differ in weight and size, age is only a rough guide as to what is the correct restraint to use.

Children aged 1–16 years must be restrained in either an approved, properly fitted and adjusted child restraint suitable for the child's size and weight or seat belt that is properly adjusted and fastened.

When can children legally sit in the front seat?

Children can legally sit in the front seat at any age provided they are using the restraint that is right for the child's size and weight. A child is much safer in the back seat, so fill the back seat positions first with the smaller children. The back seat offers 35–40% more protection for passengers.

Can I use child restraints if there are airbags fitted?

It is **illegal** to use a rearward-facing restraint in a position where it will be hit by an exploding airbag. Check the manufacturer's instructions and the vehicle owner's manual about positioning the restraint.

Children in forward facing seats are best in the back seat. If there is no alternative and a child must sit in the front passenger seat, slide or push the seat back as far as possible while still ensuring the seat belt fits correctly.

## General passenger safety tips

- Always wear your own seatbelt – they will copy what you do and expect to be restrained. Praise and reward good behaviour
- Make sure that your child's restraint is properly fitted and comfortable before you start any trip, no matter how short
- Be firm about restraint wearing, even if your child resists. Your child's safety is your responsibility
- Make sure there are no loose objects on the parcel shelf or in the cargo area of a station wagon or hatchback. Loose items in the car can fly about in a car crash and injure passengers. Keep items stowed away in the car boot, glove box or behind a cargo barrier in station wagons
- It is illegal to leave children (or pets) in a car unattended, even for a short time. The temperature in the car can reach dangerously high temperatures in a short period of time
- Pets should also be restrained

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## Choosing a car restraint: which is the best restraint to buy?

Choice of restraint depends on the size and weight of the child, size of vehicle, the space available and costs involved. Parents have the choice of buying or hiring single purpose infant restraints such as a baby safety capsule and then a toddler car seat or they can buy a convertible type car restraint.

Whatever restraint you use, follow the manufacturer's instructions. If you don't have fitting instructions or the instructions are hard to follow, ring the manufacturer or go to a restraint fitting station for advice. The following are the types of restraints for children of various weights and sizes:

Type of restraint	Weight limits
Rearward-facing baby restraints	Up to 9 kg (or up to 12 kg)
Forward-facing child seat	8 kg to 18 kg
Combination seat (forward facing child seat and booster in one)	8 kg to 26 kg
Booster seat	14 kg to 26 kg
Child harness	14 kg to 32 kg

The time to move a baby from the rearward to forward facing position is when the baby:

- Has reached the weight limit (length is not so important).
- Is able to sit up independently
- Has sufficient neck strength to hold their head up for the duration of the journey (usually about six months of age).

Remember that weight and height are the most important factors. Rearward facing is the safest way to travel, so keep your baby in this position until he or she reaches the restraint's maximum weight.

The time to move from a child car restraint to a booster seat is when:

- The child has reached either the weight or height limit.
- The harness is stretched to its limit and is tight on the child's shoulders even when adjusted to the highest position.
- The child's eye level is at the same level as the top of the car restraint, i.e. the child's head is above the top of the seat and the neck is no longer supported.

**NOTE:** It is illegal to use a booster seat with a lap belt only. If only a lap belt is being used, a child H-harness **MUST** be used to hold the child's head and shoulders back.

## When can a child use an adult seat belt?

An adult seat belt is more appropriate for a child who weighs over 26kg and who has outgrown the booster seat. A good alternative however, is to continue to use a H-harness until the child is 32kg.

The adult seat belt (lap/sash belt) must fit correctly on the child's body to prevent injury. The sash must be over the shoulder, well away from the child's neck. The lap belt must fit across the hips, not higher up on the body. A device called a SafeFit guide may help to position the adult seat belt correctly on the child.

Children who have a physical impairment, medical condition or special needs may have to have a car seat modified by a professional or use a purpose built car restraint. Drivers of these children need to carry a current medical certificate stating that use of a standard restraint is impractical.

## What should I do with my restraint if it has been in a crash?

Restraints are designed to protect children in a single car crash. If the vehicle is involved in a serious crash, then the restraint should be destroyed and replaced by another. A serious crash is one where the vehicle is so badly damaged it is 'written off' by the insurer or where someone is injured so severely they have to be taken to hospital.

## Should I buy a second hand restraint?

Yes, you can, but find out about its history. Check the back or underside of the restraint for the AS1754 sticker and the date of manufacture. Restraints have a life of about ten years if well looked after.

Don't use a restraint that is older than 15 years. Check straps for fraying, buckles for smooth operation and the shell of a car seat or capsule for cracks and stress marks.

## Can I hire restraints?

There are a number of companies that hire infant and child restraints and booster seats. Some municipal councils also operate a hire scheme for infant restraints.

## How do I restrain my child in a taxi?

Taxis are required by law to provide seat belts and anchor points to enable people to fit their own restraint if they have one. Children under one year do not, by law, have to use a child restraint in a taxi if there is not one available, but they must travel in the back of the taxi. If it is possible, take your own restraint with you. If not, travel in the back of the taxi and cocoon your baby on the floor of the car. It is not safe to put a child in a seat belt with you. In a crash your body could crush the child.

Children aged one year and over must be restrained in a taxi by a seatbelt or child restraint if available. A child H-harness is a good way to restrain children over one in a taxi.

## Is it safe for children to share seat belts?

No, seat belts are designed for one person only. In a crash, children could easily come out of the seat belts or be injured by each other.

## Is it safe if I wear a seat belt and I hold my child on my lap?

No. In the event of a crash, the forces involved mean that the child's weight increases so much that he/she would be impossible to hold and would be thrown forward. If child restraints or seat belts are available for a child they must be used.



### For further information on restraints contact:

RACV (03) 9790 2863

Vic Roads Road Safety Information Service 1300 360 745  
[www.vicroads.vic.gov.au](http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au)

