

Child safety in the car

The best way to prevent injuries to children in a crash is by taking care to restrain them properly while travelling in a car. By law, all passengers must be restrained appropriately at all times when travelling in a car in Australia.

Children should be restrained using the right child restraint for their age and size. All child restraints must comply with the Australian Standard for child restraints. When fitted and used correctly, restraints are very effective.

Child restraints – rear and forward facing

When using child restraints:

- Check the harness has no twists and is firm.
- Make sure your child's arms are secured correctly in the harness straps.
- Check the seatbelt buckles securing the restraint and the child are done up.

Booster seats

When using booster seats:

- Use the booster seatbelt guide to ensure the sash part of the seatbelt is positioned on your child's shoulder.
- If there is a top tether strap, ensure it is correctly attached to the child anchor location.
- Make sure the seatbelt is firmly fitted.
- The lap part of the seatbelt should pass over the upper thighs and across the hips – not the stomach area.

Child restraints and the law

In Victoria, children under seven years of age must be restrained in an approved child restraint or approved booster seat when travelling in a motor vehicle. Children over seven years of age and under 16 years must be restrained in a booster seat or adult seatbelt.

The rules require that:

- Children aged under six months must use an approved, properly fastened and adjusted rearward-facing child restraint.
- Children aged between six months and four years old must use a properly fastened and adjusted rearward-facing child restraint OR a forward-facing child restraint.
- Children aged between four and seven years old must use a properly fastened and adjusted forward-facing child restraint OR booster seat.
- Children between seven and 16 years old must use a booster seat with a properly fastened and adjusted lap/sash seatbelt or child safety harness; or a properly fastened and adjusted seatbelt.

There are also laws for where children can sit in vehicles:

- If a car has two or more rows of seats, then children under four years old must not travel in the front seat.

- If all rear seats are being used by children under seven years old, children aged between four and seven years old may travel in the front seat, provided they use an approved booster seat.

Babies

For babies up to at least six months of age:

- You must use a rearward-facing child restraint as this is the safest way to travel.
- Every time you use the restraint, check that the harness is adjusted so that it fits the baby as snugly as possible.
- If you use a baby rug, place it over the baby **after** you have secured the baby into the restraint.
- Adjust the shoulder straps as the child grows.

Toddlers

For toddlers from approximately six months to at least four years:

- Use a forward-facing child restraint that is held in place by the adult seatbelt and the top tether strap.
- Every time you use the restraint, check that the seatbelt is firm and that the straps fit snugly and are not twisted.
- Refer to the manufacturer's instructions to adjust the harness system and the shoulder straps as the child grows.
- Use the child restraint until your child has outgrown the restraint.
- If your child outgrows the child restraint before four years of age seek advice from the VicRoads Road Safety Information Service on 1300 360 745 or The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre Tel. (03) 9345 5085 to assess your child's restraint needs.

Children

Children approximately four years old to at least seven years old should use a booster seat until they have outgrown it. An adult/lap sash seatbelt is designed for people who are a minimum height of 145cm.

If your child is under seven years old and has outgrown their booster seat, it is recommended that you visit an RACV restraint fitting station for assessment:

- Booster seats meeting the 2010 child restraint standard are suitable for children up to approximately six to eight years old.
- Booster cushions are not recommended, as they provide no protection in a side impact crash.

Options for children with additional needs

- Children with additional needs may present challenges for safe motor vehicle travel. Allied health professionals (such as an occupational therapist) work together with families to identify strategies that may include modifying a child restraint, recommending a child restraint accessory, or prescribing a specialised child restraint for children with disabilities. Modifications to a child restraint must be undertaken on the advice of medical and allied health staff.
- The road rules in each state and territory provide seatbelt exemptions, which include child restraints and booster seats. However, there are different laws in each jurisdiction to receive an exemption. Seek advice from the road authority in your state or territory.

Restraint hire schemes

Restraint hire schemes allow parents and carers of children to hire restraints for a specified time. Some hire schemes are operated by local councils and there are also several companies that hire out restraints. There is usually a bond and a fee for the hire of a restraint.

Travelling with children

Travelling with children can be challenging. The following tips may help to provide an enjoyable time for everyone:

Praise or reward good behaviour.

- Explain to children that you can't go anywhere unless the seatbelts are all buckled.
- Talk or sing with children, or play music to make the time pass more quickly.
- Play fun games such as 'I spy'.
- If travelling long distances by aeroplane or train, take your child restraint or booster seat with you.
- If you have a toddler and a baby, take the baby out of the car safely before the toddler gets out.
- Take regular breaks when driving to minimise the distress to both driver and passengers.
- Secure loose objects (toys and other items) that could fly about in a car crash or with heavy braking, and injure your passengers. Pets should also be restrained.
- Avoid heat stroke. It is illegal and dangerous 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.
- The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre has information in English and a range of other languages on keeping your children safe in the car.

Where to get help

- The Royal Children's Hospital, Safety Centre Tel. (03) 9345 5085
- The Resource Centre for Child Health and Safety Tel. (03) 9345 6429
- VicRoads, Road Safety Telephone Information Line Tel. 1300 360 745
- RACV Tel. (03) 9790 2190

Things to remember

- By law, children must be restrained appropriately at all times when travelling in a car in Australia.
- Make sure you choose the right restraint for your child and your vehicle.
- Restraints need to be fitted and used correctly.
- Travelling with children can be challenging, but there are things you can do to make the journey easier and safer.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Royal Childrens Hospital - Safety Centre

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