
Child safety in the car

Summary

- 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.
 - Only move children to the next category of restraint once they are too big for their current restraint.
-

The best way to prevent injuries to children in a crash is by taking care to correctly restrain them 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 (AS/NZS 1754). When fitted and used correctly, restraints are very effective in protecting children in the event of a crash. To find out the independent safety and ease-of-use rating of child restraints visit the [Child Car Seats](#) website.

Cars can quickly become very hot, so never leave a baby or child alone in a car, even in mild weather.

Never leave a child alone in a car

Leaving a child on their own, locked in a car on any day – even for a short period – can be fatal. **The temperature inside a car can very quickly climb to dangerous levels.**

Children are more at risk from heat-related problems than adults because they can lose fluid very quickly and become dehydrated, leading to heat stroke and potentially death.

Ambulance Victoria data shows that in the period between 1 September 2017 and 31 August 2018, Ambulance Victoria responded to 1,587 callouts for people locked in cars across Victoria, the majority being cases involving toddlers and babies.

In all states and territories in Australia, it is illegal to leave a child unattended in a vehicle for any length of time. In Victoria, it is illegal to leave a child unattended in a vehicle under the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005. The penalty for doing so is a fine of \$4,030 or up to six months in jail, or both.

The [Never leave kids in cars](#) page has more information about child car safety.

Child restraints – rear and forward facing

When using child restraints:

- Check the harness and top tether have no twists and are firm.
- Make sure your child's arms are secured correctly by the harness and check the tension of the harness straps by fitting two fingers between the harness and the child.
- Check the seatbelt and harness buckles are clicked into place properly.
- If you are using an ISOFIX-compatible child restraint, make sure the ISOFIX attachments are correctly clicked into place.

Booster seats

When using booster seats:

- Use the booster seatbelt guide to make sure the sash part of the seatbelt is positioned on your child's shoulder.
- If there is a top tether strap, make sure it is correctly attached to the child restraint anchor location.
- Make sure the seatbelt is firmly adjusted.
- 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. For safety reasons, it is recommended to only transition children to the next category of restraint when they outgrow their current restraint.

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 seven 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 aged between seven and 16 years** old must use a booster seat with a properly fastened and adjusted lap or sash seatbelt or child safety harness, or a properly fastened and adjusted seatbelt.

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

- 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. Because there are no child restraint anchorage points for the front seat, you will need to use a booster seat that does not have a top tether strap.

Kidsafe Victoria has more information on child restraint laws and the **National Child Restraint Best Practice Guidelines**.

Safety for babies in the car

For babies up to at least six months of age:

- They must travel in a rearward-facing child restraint.
- Every time you use the restraint, check that the harness is adjusted so that it fits the baby as snugly as possible and is not twisted.
- Use the child restraint until your child has outgrown the restraint.
- If you use a baby blanket, place it over the baby after you have secured the baby into the restraint.
- Adjust the shoulder straps as the child grows – for rearward-facing restraints, always use the harness strap slot nearest the child's shoulders but not below their shoulders.

Safety for toddlers in the car

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

- Use a rearward-facing child restraint or forward-facing child restraint that is held in place by the adult seatbelt and the top tether strap. It is safest for your child to keep using their rearward-facing restraint until they outgrow the size limits of that restraint.
- Every time you use the restraint, check that the seatbelt is firm and that the harness 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. For forward-facing restraints, always use the harness slot nearest to the child's shoulders but no more than 2.5 cm below the shoulders.

- 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 [VicRoads](#) or [Kidsafe Victoria](#) to assess your child's restraint needs.

Safety for children in the car

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

If your child is under seven years old and has outgrown their booster seat, it is recommended that you visit a **professional child restraint fitting station** (such as an **RACV restraint fitting station**) for assessment. Be aware that:

- There are booster seats available that are suitable for children up to approximately 10 years of age.
- Booster cushions are not recommended, as they do not provide protection in a side impact crash.

The **National Child Restraint Best Practice Guidelines**, developed by Neuroscience Research Australia and Kidsafe, include a handy '5 step test' to help determine when a child is ready to use an adult lap sash seatbelt.

Children 12 years of age and under are safest in the rear seat.

Options for children with disability or reduced mobility

Children with disability or reduced mobility may present challenges for safe motor vehicle travel. Allied health professionals (such as an occupational therapist) can work together with families to identify safe motor vehicle travel strategies, such as:

- modifying a child restraint
- recommending a child restraint accessory
- prescribing a special purpose child restraint for children with disabilities.

Modifications to a child restraint must be undertaken on the advice of medical and allied health staff.

Some exemptions to child restraint laws may apply to children with a medical condition or physical disability. Seek advice from a health professional who can prescribe the best restraint for your child. Further advice can be obtained from the **road authority in your state or territory**, or from Mobility and Accessibility for Children and Adults (MACA), tel. **0419 578 848**.

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. Some tips to help provide an enjoyable time for everyone include:

- 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 every two hours when driving to minimise the distress to passengers and driver fatigue.
- Secure loose objects (toys and other items) in the car that could fly about and injure passengers during a crash or heavy braking. Pets should also be restrained.

- Avoid heat stroke. It is extremely 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.
- Make sure children exit the car from the kerb side door, where possible.

Where to get help

- **The Royal Children's Hospital, Kids Health Info**
- **Kidsafe Victoria** Tel. **(03) 9036 2306**
- **Starting Out Safely – Child Road Safety (Early Learning Association Australia)** Tel. **(03) 9489 3500**
- **VicRoads**
- **RACV** Tel. **13 72 28**

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

Kidsafe Victoria

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2021 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.