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## Child safety in the car

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### 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.
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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. 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 – especially a hot 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 September 2014–August 2015, paramedics rescued 1,433 children (under 13 years of age) who had been left unattended in cars. More recently, between 1 January and 5 February 2015, 204 calls were made to triple zero in relation to children being locked in cars.

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 \$3,690 or up to six months in jail.

### 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 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.

### 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.

**Kidsafe Victoria** has more information on child restraint laws.

### **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.

### **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.
- 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 **VicRoads** or **The Royal**

**Children's Hospital Safety Centre** (Tel. (03) 9345 5085) 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 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.

### **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) 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 specialised 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**. The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne has further information on children and youth with additional needs on its Transportation of Children with Additional Needs

(TOCAN) **webpage**.

### **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.
- Children should exit the car from the kerb side door where possible.

### **Where to get help**

- The **Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre**. Tel. (03) 9345 5085

- The **Kids Health Info Bookshop**. Tel. (03) 9345 6429
- **RACV** Tel. 13 72 28

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Royal Children's Hospital - Safety Centre

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