News Release
For Immediate Release

Would your Child's Car Seat pass the Test?
The Five Most Common Car Seat Mistakes

Parents often ask car seat experts what is the safest seat for their child. Truth be told, it is not the brand of seat they purchase, but making sure it is being used correctly that is what will save their child's life. Car seats are very protective and effective in preventing injuries and death, but they must be used correctly in order to provide this protection. Unfortunately, most parents are not using their car seats correctly, with misuse reported from 70 to 99 percent depending on which study is used.

Children are at greater risk than adults in a vehicle crash. In fact, motor vehicle crashes are one of the leading causes of death for children 14 and under. Safety belts and car seats are the single most effective tool in reducing these deaths and injuries.

Here is a list of the most common mistakes we see with car seats and how they can be avoided. Checking the list and making sure your child's car seat is being used correctly can very likely prevent a needless tragedy.

1. Installation Errors:

   Installing a car seat using the vehicle seat belt requires the user to know what part of the seat belt locks in the car seat. Unlike an adult in a seat belt, where the seat belt will lock up in a crash or a sudden stop, the car seat must be pre-crash locked from the moment the vehicle starts. Vehicles made in 1996 and newer are required to have a way to lock in a car seat in every position except the driver's seat. Most vehicles have a shoulder belt retractor that — when gently pulled all the way out — will change from locking in an emergency to locking all the time for a car seat. Some car manufacturers put the locking mechanism in the latch plate instead of a shoulder belt.

   The 2003 model vehicles have LATCH (Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children) installed in at least two seating positions. The lower anchors and the tether take the place of the seat belt and should not be used together with the seat belt unless both the car seat and vehicle instructions allow this. Make sure to use the correct lower anchors for the installation. Many cars do not have lower anchors in the center rear position. Sometimes a center lower anchor position can be created if the vehicle and car seat manufacturer agree. Neither LATCH nor the seat belt are safer than the other. Choose the system that gives the best installation and is easy to use correctly. Whether using the seat belt or LATCH, it is important to connect the top tether strap for forward facing seats.

   Check the car seat at the belt path to make sure it is secure. It should not move more than 1 inch side-to-side or front-to-back when tugged on at the belt path.

2. Selection Errors:

   Most children leave the hospital in a rear-facing only infant seat, although some leave in a rear-facing convertible seat. The rear-facing convertible seat is usually the next step after the infant seat. Children should remain rear-facing until they reach the maximum height or weight limit for the rear-facing convertible seat. Most convertible seats go to at least 40 pounds rear-facing, while there are some that go to 45 and 50 pounds rear-facing. At 40 to 50 pounds, it could accommodate an average 3-to-4-year-old.

   Children should ride in a forward-facing harnessed seat until they reach the height or weight limit for the seat. The average forward-facing seat goes to at least 40 pounds in the harness, with many available that go to 50, 65, 70 or even 85 pounds.

When the limit of the forward-facing seat has been reached, caregivers can consider a booster seat if the child is at least 4 years old, 40 pounds, and mature enough to stay correctly seated and buckled for the entire trip.

Booster seats should be used until the child correctly fits the seat belt. This is usually sometime between 8 and 12 years old. Although the law in Texas states that children at age 8 can legally ride in a seat belt, for most children at this age the lap and shoulder belt does not fit correctly. The lap belt riding over the child's abdomen and soft tissue and organs can cause serious or fatal injuries in a crash. The shoulder belt needs to fit correctly across the middle of the shoulder and flat across the chest. It should not rub against the child's neck, causing them to put it behind their shoulder and leaving them with no upper body protection.

Seat belts can be used when the child can sit up straight, bend their knees at the edge of the vehicle bench, touch the floor, and have a good fit of the lap belt over the upper thighs and the shoulder belt across the middle of the shoulder and flat against the chest.

3. Direction Errors:

   Most parents are turning their child forward-facing too soon. Parents are understandably anxious to see their child forward-facing so that they can better interact with them. However, research shows that rear-facing is the safest way for a small child to travel. Rear-facing helps to align the child's head, neck and spine and spreads the crash forces over the child's body rather than concentrating them in any one area. When a child's legs are against the back of the vehicle seat it is often misinterpreted as a sign that the child is too big to be rear-facing. It is important to know that children's joints are still forming and remain very flexible and they are not uncomfortable with their legs against the back of the seat. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends keeping a child rear-facing until they reach the maximum weight or height limit for the rear-facing convertible.

4. Harnessing Errors:

   Many children are riding with harness systems that are loose and not at the correct position in relation to the child's shoulders. Rear-facing seats should have the harness at or below the child's shoulders, while forward-facing seats need to have the harness at or above the shoulders. The plastic clip that comes on all harnessed seats needs to go across the chest armpit to armpit in order to make sure that the straps are properly positioned on the child's shoulders.

   Make sure that the harness is snug by testing the webbing at the child's shoulders. If you can pinch up any of the webbing, it is too loose. Do not add anything to a harness system that did not come with the seat — as it is not crash tested and may interfere with the seat performance. Proper harnessing helps to prevent movement, which in turn helps to protect the child from injuries.

5. Skipping a Free Inspection

   It is important to read the manual that comes with your car seat as well as the owner's manual from your vehicle in order to make sure you are using the car seat correctly and installing it correctly in the vehicle. In addition, have your car seat inspected by a certified child passenger safety technician.

   That's why the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Passenger Safety Project and Cherrie Curtis, County Coordinator in Bowie County is urging all parents and caregivers to be sure that their child is riding in the right seat, going in the right direction, harnessed properly and installed correctly by getting a free car seat inspection. Car seat inspections are performed by nationally certified child passenger safety technicians. Visit: http://buckleup.tamu.edu, to find a technician in your area by searching city, county or zip code.