

Baby's first car seat

By Zora Marko



Starting Out Safely

Expectant parents are often bombarded with information on the latest and greatest equipment you *need* when you welcome a new baby into your life. Much of the information can be confusing and misleading. All that new parents really want is simple answers on what is best for your baby, particularly when it comes to health and safety equipment.

Like all baby equipment, there is a large variety of brands and styles of child car seats available. So how do new parents choose and use the right car seat to ensure your baby's car trips are as safe as possible?



Which child car seat to buy?

It is required by law that babies are transported in a rear facing car seat or capsule. A young baby is at greater risk of injury in a crash when forward-facing as their head is heavy and large in proportion to the rest of their body. By lying down and being rearward facing the impact of a crash is absorbed into the child car seat. Therefore, it is safest to keep them rearward facing for as long as they can fit into the restraint as per the manufacturer's instructions. There are now child car seats that fit a child in a rearward facing position for approximately 30 months.

You will need to choose between a capsule or a convertible car seat. A convertible child car seat initially is used in a rearward facing position and can be changed to face the front when your baby is ready. You will also need to consider the size of your car and whether the restraint you will choose will fit.

The child car seat website www.childcarseats.com.au is a great resource that can help you with your purchasing decisions. It provides objective comparisons on the performance of child car seats. It also provides information on ratings and correct use of child car seats.

Australia has some of the highest safety standards for child car seats in the world and every seat sold must undergo rigorous testing to meet these standards. No child car seat can be sold in Australia unless it meets these Australian Standards.

It is illegal to use a child car seat that has been purchased overseas if it does not meet Australian Standards, so check for the Australian Standards label on the child car seat prior to purchase.



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Which child car seat to buy?

There will be times when you will need to move your seat to another car, or to adjust and check the straps as your child grows or to clean around the child car seat. Therefore, it is important that you know how to fit a child car seat yourself.

The first step is to read the manual thoroughly. You may also need to check your car manual to find the correct anchorage points in your car.

Next install the child car seat or capsule by following the manual's step-by-step instructions. Make sure that you don't skip any of the steps.

If you are **not confident** that you have fitted the restraint properly then contact a restraint fitter to teach you how to fit the child car seat correctly. Ask your fitter to watch you fit the child car seat to ensure you can install the seat by yourself.

This means that you will be able to confidently move and adjust the seat whenever you need to.

Using your child car seat – the dos and don'ts

Before you start any trip with your baby, ensure that the harness straps are level with or just above your baby's shoulders and that the harness is firm and without twists.

If the straps are twisted or loose, they can't distribute the crash forces evenly and won't adequately protect your baby in a crash. You shouldn't be able to fit more than two fingers between the straps and your baby's chest.

The straps should fit snugly on the shoulders and not hang off the top of their arms. All parts of the harness straps should lie flat on the baby's body.

Make sure your baby's arms are secured correctly in the harness straps and that the harness buckle securing your baby is done up.

Also check that the seat belt buckle securing the car seat is done up. The top tether strap should be firm and attached to the anchor point.

There are some important "don'ts" when it comes to using a child car seat.



There are some important don'ts when it comes to using a car seat.

Do not swaddle or wrap your baby before putting them in the capsule or child car seat. If you swaddle a child then their arms and legs are not in the correct position and the child car seat will not work properly to protect your child.

Do not dress your baby in bulky or padded clothing. This makes it very difficult to properly adjust the harness to be tight enough. The padding compresses in a crash, making the harness a lot looser and therefore less effective in protecting your baby. If you are concerned about your baby being cold then put a blanket over the top of them once they are securely in their capsule or child car seat.

Do not use a child car seat or capsule as another place for your baby to sleep for long periods. The advice from Red Nose is clear: "Car seats and capsules have been designed as restraints to keep baby safe whilst travelling in a car; they should not be used as a sleeping environment".

Once the car trip is over it is very important that you remove your baby from the car seat or capsule, even if this means waking your baby, because it is not safe for them to spend long periods in car seats, capsules or infant seats. Car seats may cause your baby's neck to flex forward which may block their airway restricting airflow.

Also be aware that babies have fallen out of capsules that have been used outside of the car as infant carriers. These accidents have often involved babies who had been left unbuckled.

Be very careful about adding items to your capsule or child car seat. Child car seats and capsules sold in Australia undergo stringent testing to meet our standards. They are tested without any other product, which is not supplied with the seat, attached to them. If you add other products to them you may be changing the performance of the capsule or the child car seat and stopping it from functioning as it was designed to in a crash.

Toys, mirrors and other loose items can also turn into dangerous projectiles in a crash. So store your items securely so that in the event of a crash they don't go flying and potentially hurt you or your baby.

Do's

BEFORE YOU START ANY TRIP WITH YOUR BABY ENSURE THAT

- the harness straps are level with or just above your baby's shoulders
- the harness is firm and without twists
- your baby's arms are secured correctly in the harness straps
- the seat belt buckle securing the car seat is done up
- the harness belt buckle securing your baby is done up
- the top tether strap is firm and appropriately attached to the anchor point

Don'ts

IMPORTANT TIPS FOR TRAVELLING IN A CAR WITH YOUR NEW BORN

- do not swaddle your baby
- do not dress your baby in bulky clothes
- do not leave your baby sleeping in the capsule or convertible child car seat
- carefully consider whether you should be using accessories

So you have researched which capsule or child car seat best suits your new baby. You have read the instruction manual and if you needed to, you went to a child car seat fitter. They taught you how to fit and use the child car seat. You know what to do and what not to do when it comes to placing your baby in the capsule or child car seat.

Now you can be confident that your baby's first trip home will be as safe as you can make it.

Useful information

Information on child road safety www.childroadsafety.org.au

Video on use of car seats www.carseatssavelives.com.au

Safety ratings of child car seats www.childcarseats.org.au

Victorian road laws www.vicroads.vic.gov.au

The Transport Accident Commission (TAC) and Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) have worked with leading early childhood experts and researchers to put together easy to understand information to help parents make the best choices in transporting their babies safely.

Zora Marko is the Project Manager of the Road Safety Education project, Starting Out Safely, for Early Learning Association Australia. Starting Out Safely, funded by the TAC, is Victoria's early childhood road safety education program. The program is about children, parents, carers and early childhood educators working together to guide children's learning in being and becoming safe and independent road users.



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