

TRANSPORTING CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

BY CLARE KENNEDY



Every child has the right to travel comfortably and safely. But until recently, that has posed a challenge for families who have children with additional needs.

Research shows that children with a disability have a greater risk of injury or fatality as a result of a car collision and many parents and carers find it difficult to find a suitable car seat that suits their child's needs.

Sarah* was born with an abdominal wall defect requiring surgery and ongoing medical attention. After a long hospital stay, it was time to go home; but the question was how to transport her safely and comfortably and in a way that met regulations.

The compliant baby capsule exerted pressure on her abdomen, but due to her condition, she was not allowed to have any pressure in that area and, in particular, on her liver region. As a result, the baby

capsule had to be modified. But were the modifications safe and compliant?

Joy Goubran is the manager of occupational therapy at The Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) Melbourne, and has seen first-hand the challenges that arise around transporting children with additional needs.

"Children with additional needs can present in many different ways, with challenges that may be temporary or life-long.

Behavioural issues, difficulties with posture or head control and restrictions following surgery or injury may mean they have to travel in a particular way. Some life-limiting conditions may require ventilation or other equipment.

"These children are more vulnerable on our roads because they cannot necessarily travel in the same child car seat as other children. Often the knowledge and skills, and even the range of possibilities of what can be done for these children is limited," she said.

"It is an area that several occupational therapists and other professionals have struggled to address due to limited knowledge and skills in the area, and so children may have travelled in sub-optimal child car seats or avoided vehicle travel as it was too difficult," she said.

“ Concern about the lack of knowledge and expertise around the safe transport of children with additional needs led to the development of the Transportation of Children and Youth with Additional Needs Partnership known as TOCAN, in 2009. TOCAN is a partnership of several key stakeholders, committed to the safe travel of children and youth with additional needs.

The RCH have been assisting in reviewing and updating Australian/NZ standards.

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TOCAN is a partnership of several key stakeholders committed to the safe travel of children and youth with additional needs. Partners include ELAA, representatives from the RCH Safety Centre, the RCH Occupational Therapy Department, The Victorian Paediatric Rehabilitation Service, the School of Occupational Therapy at La Trobe University, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, VicRoads, the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV), Britax Childcare, the Australian Child Restraint Resource Initiative, Autism Victoria and the Association for Children with a Disability.

TOCAN has become an invaluable resource for parents, carers and health professionals, providing the information they need to assess and prescribe appropriate child car seats.

The TOCAN website, which went live last year, sets out the legal standard for an appropriate child car seat, booster seat or seat belt, as well as listing the modifiable restraints and specialised restraints that are available.

It also shows where to find an occupational therapist who can identify a restraint that’s appropriate, whether that involves identifying a mainstream child car seat, a modifiable one, or prescribing a special purpose restraint.

“Apart from the TOCAN website, and development of the standard, we are constantly trying to expand our resources with education seminars for therapists and professionals who service these children in the community,” Ms Goubran said.

The aim is to train and empower professionals so they can give the appropriate advice to families, she explains.

As a partner of TOCAN, ELAA is a strong advocate for the safe transport of children.

Zora Marko is ELAA’s representative on TOCAN, as well as ELAA’s early childhood road safety program manager.

“Over the years we’ve developed expertise in child car seats, and worked with educators in child care services. We play a significant role in relaying the latest restraint information to early childhood educators,” she said.

“We want to ensure that practitioners who are assisting families with children with additional needs know where to go and what to do.”

ELAA delivers the *Starting Out Safely* program, which is funded by VicRoads and provides information for parents, carers and educators about children becoming safe and independent road users. It includes practical information and resources about the transportation of children with additional needs.

You can find the *Starting Out Safely* program by going to the ELAA website and clicking on ‘Road Safety Education’. This takes you to a range of resources

on the appropriate use of child car seats, including an information brochure, *Travelling with Children in Cars*, available in 22 languages and 10 audio versions.

The site includes information on choosing and using the safest restraint for your child and has links to the TOCAN website, as well as downloadable resources by the RACV and VicRoads.

So what happened to baby Sarah? Using current resources, Sarah’s occupational therapist was able to resolve the issue of transporting Sarah safely. The solution was a compliant baby capsule, which included modifications such as added padding to the seat and side of the capsule. Her parents were educated about the importance of positioning the belt buckle in the nappy region; and a medical exemption to the standard was signed off by medical staff and given to parents to keep in the car.

Tools, tips and information are available at the website www.rch.org.au/tocan.

* a different name has been used to protect the child’s privacy.

