



Associate Professor Warwick Teague – Director of Paediatric Trauma at the Royal Children’s Hospital is passionate about keeping children safe in cars. Warwick is one of the key presenters featured in ELAA’s new video resource guide ‘Child Restraints and Booster Seats – What You Need to Know’.

HEIGHT, NOT AGE, IS THE KEY TO CHILD SEAT BELT SAFETY

BY ZORA MARKO – ELAA ROAD SAFETY EDUCATION PROJECT MANAGER

Most people believe that if they follow the law when transporting children in a car, they are doing what is safest for their children. However, there is a substantial difference in what the law requires and what current research tells us we should be doing to keep our children safe in a car in the event of a crash.

The law says that children do not have to be in a child restraint once they are over seven years of age. The law also allows children to sit in the front seat of a car once they are over seven years of age. However, research shows that children are safest if they stay in a child car seat until they are approximately 145cm, regardless of age. In general, children will reach this size when they are **10 to 12 years of age**.

How a seat belt works

To understand why height rather than age is important, we need to know how seat belts work in a crash. According to Dr Julie Brown from Neuroscience Research Australia and a founding member of the

Child Restraint Evaluation Program, “The vehicle environment i.e. the seats and seat belt systems, are designed for adult occupants. Booster seats are designed to increase the seated height of children to help them achieve a better seat belt fit.”

A seat belt is designed to sit over the strong bones of the body and absorb the impact of a crash. These bones also protect vital organs. The seat belt sash must sit over the shoulder and across the sternum. The lap part of the belt should sit across the hips. If a child is too short the seat belt sits across their neck and across their stomach. This means that the blood vessels and arteries to the brain and

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internal organs in the abdomen can be damaged and result in serious or even fatal injuries as the seat belt impacts with the body in a crash. Even a low impact crash can cause very serious injuries to internal organs and the neck. Children under 145cm are more at risk of injury from an airbag than an adult.

Dr Warrick Teague, Associate Professor and Director of Paediatric Trauma at The Royal Children’s Hospital, says that ill-fitting or inadequate restraints, can make motor vehicles dangerous places for young children. He recommends that behavioural changes are needed to help reduce the road toll and the traumatic effect of serious and long lasting injuries to children.

How can early childhood educators help?

Early childhood educators can play an important role in educating children, families and communities to positively influence how children travel in their family cars. This approach includes educating the educators, providing information and workshops for parents and integrating road safety education into the early childhood service’s curriculum and policies. It is important that early childhood educators and services ensure they are up-to-date on best practice in safe transportation of children and have the latest materials on hand to support their families.

Parents and educators of young children are able to influence attitudes of children to child restraints at an early age. The expectation can be set with children and their families that child restraints will be used until the child is 145cm in height at which stage they would be able to move to using an adult seat belt.

Resources for educators

ELAA has developed a number of resources to help educators, parents and children understand and reinforce the message that children under 145cm should not be in adult seat belts or in the front seat of the car. One of the resources available, the video, *Child Restraints and Booster Seats – What You Need to Know* provides parents and care-givers with valuable research and ideas they can apply in their daily routine to help protect the lives of the children in their care.

Unfortunately, road trauma is still the number one cause of death of Australian children. Approximately three thousand children are seriously injured each year on our roads. Whilst the law remains to be changed to follow the recommendations of current research, the community can still share the message – it is important that children are over 145cm in height when they graduate to using an adult seat belt. This will help reduce the number of children killed and injured in car crashes.



For more information
childroadsafety.org.au
carseatssavelives.org.au
 (includes video *Child Restraints and Booster Seats*)

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