

Buckle Up, Save a Life

Injuries from motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death among children in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) noted there were 599 passengers ages 12 and younger killed in motor vehicle crashes in 2022 and 106,000 were injured. Of those 599 children who died, 35% were not wearing a seat belt.¹ The risk of injury or death in a motor vehicle accident cannot be understated.

Proper use of car seats, booster seats or seat belts can prevent serious injuries and deaths. Proper use refers to ensuring the child is buckled in the appropriate seat for their age, weight and height. The CDC reports reduction in risk of injury in a crash by 71–82% for children in a car seat and at least 45% for children ages 4 to 8 in a booster seat, when compared with seat belt use alone. For older children and adults, seat belt use reduces the risk of serious injury or death by about half.

By following the proper child passenger safety guidelines, parents and caregivers can make a lifesaving difference every trip.

Child Passenger Age and Size Safety Guidelines for Parents and Caregivers

The CDC provides the following guidance to ensure children are properly buckled in a car seat, booster seat, or seat belt—whichever is appropriate for their age, weight, and height.

Stage 1. Rear-facing car seat: Birth until age 2–4.

The CDC recommends buckling infants and toddlers in a rear-facing car seat with a harness, in the back seat until they reach the maximum weight or height limit of their car seat for best protection. The car seat manual and labels on the car seat have detailed information about weight and height limits.

In addition to recommendations by the CDC, it is important to know state laws regarding child passenger safety. In Indiana, children under the age of one and who weigh less than 20 pounds, are required to sit in a rear-facing car seat.

Never place a rear-facing car seat in the front seat. Front passenger air bags can cause injury or death of young children in a crash.

Stage 2. Forward-facing car seat: After outgrowing their rear-facing car seat and until at least age 5.

Forward-facing car seats are the next stage when children outgrow their rear-facing car seat. Children in a forward-facing car seat should be buckled in with a harness and a top tether, in the back seat.

They should stay in their forward-facing car seat until they reach the maximum weight or height limit of their seat or what is required by state law. The car seat manual and labels on the car seat have detailed information about weight and height limits.

In Indiana, children who are at least one year old and weigh 20 pounds or more can be seated in a forward-facing car seat. The Indiana Criminal Justice Institute and Indiana State Troopers recommend children ages 4 to 7 years old and under 40 pounds remain in a forward-facing car seat.²

Stage 3. Booster seat: After outgrowing their forward-facing car seat and when the seat belt fits properly.

Buckling in a belt-positioning booster seat, with a seat belt, in the back seat of the vehicle is the next stage once children outgrow their forward-facing

car seat. They should continue to use a booster seat with a seat belt, until the seat belt fits properly without a booster seat. According to Indiana state law, children should be in a booster seat between ages eight and 12 years old or until the child is able to securely utilize a seat belt properly.

A seat belt is considered to fit properly when the lap belt is across the upper thighs (not the stomach) and the shoulder belt is across the center of the shoulder and chest (not across the neck or face, and not off the shoulder). This is usually when children are between 9 and 12 years old according to the Indiana state law.

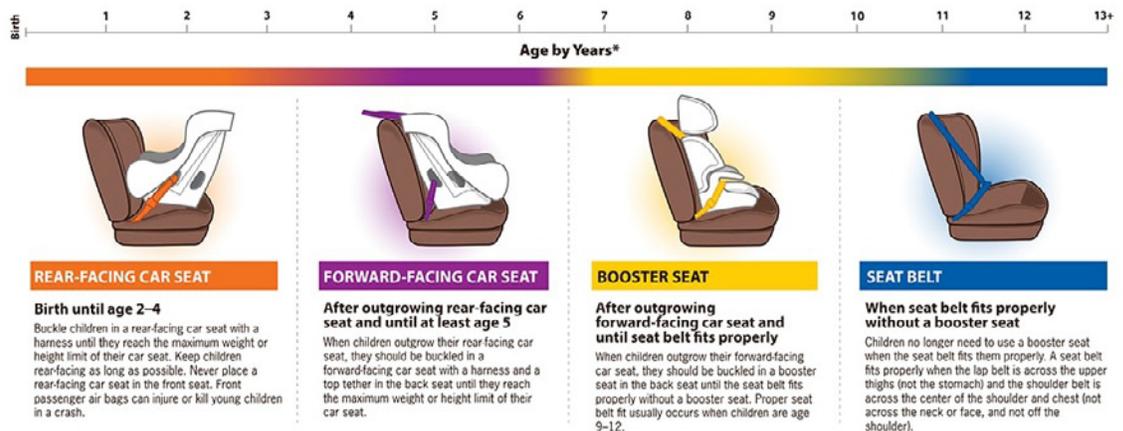
Stage 4. Seat belt: When the seat belt fits properly without a booster seat.

Booster seats can be removed when the seat belt fits the child properly. This is achieved when the lap belt is across the thighs and the shoulder belt is across the center of the shoulder and chest. This usually occurs when children are between 9 and 12 years old.

It is important to note that seat belts can fit differently in each vehicle your child rides in. Sometimes a child might need a booster seat in one vehicle but not in a different vehicle. For safety, check the seat belt fit in each vehicle to decide if a booster seat is needed.

For best possible protection, the CDC and the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute recommend keeping children properly buckled and in the back seat until **age 13**.

Make sure your child is always buckled in a car seat, booster seat, or seat belt that is appropriate for their age and size.



Keep children properly buckled in the back seat until age 13.

*Recommended age ranges for each seat type vary to account for differences in child growth and weight/height limits of car seats and booster seats. Use the car seat or booster seat manual to check for important information about installation, the seat weight and height limits, and proper seat use.

Child passenger safety recommendations: American Academy of Pediatrics 2018.

www.cdc.gov/child-passenger-safety/about



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In addition to knowing the stages for properly buckling your child, the CDC offers the following tips to minimize the risk of injury and death in a motor vehicle accident.

1. Install and use car seats and booster seats

properly on every trip. Check the car seat or booster seat manual and the vehicle owner’s manual for instructions.

Get help installing car seats and booster seats from certified child passenger safety technicians. They are trained to provide education and hands-on assistance for all types of car seats and booster seats. These services are usually free.

- a. [Find a certified child passenger safety technician near you.](#)
- b. [Find a local car seat inspection station near you.](#) Some now offer virtual appointments in addition to in-person appointments.
- c. Project Love is a program funded through the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute, to help people get vouchers for a free car seat when they are cited by law enforcement for a car seat safety violation. Click here for additional information on the [Project Love Program.](#)

2. Check the following before taking a trip:

- a. A correct recline angle for rear-facing car seats.
- b. A tight installation for all car seats.
 - i. Installed car seats should move no more than one inch from front-to-back and from side-to-side at the belt path.
- c. A tight harness that is not behind the child’s arms, legs, or back for all car seats.
 - i. Do the “[pinch test](#)” to ensure the harness is tight enough. If you can pinch the harness straps between your fingers at the child’s shoulders, this means that the harness is too loose.
- d. A harness chest clip that is at the child’s armpit level.
- e. Proper seat belt fit for children using booster seats or the seat belt alone.

3. Don’t seat children in front of an air bag. Air bags can kill young children riding in the front seat. Never place a rear-facing car seat in front of an air bag.

4. Buckle children in the middle of the back seat when possible. This is generally the safest position in the vehicle since it is the farthest point from an impact coming from any direction.

- a. If the middle seating position contains only a lap belt, older children using booster seats or seat belts should sit in a different seating position in the back seat where they can use both a lap and shoulder belt.
- b. Most rear-facing and forward-facing car seats can be safely installed in the middle seating position using the lap belt only.

5. Use the top tether with forward-facing car seats.

- a. A [top tether](#) can reduce a child’s head movement in a crash by about 4–6 inches.
- b. A top tether should be used regardless of whether the forward-facing car seat is installed with the lower anchors or with the seat belt.

6. Ensure that children are properly buckled in the back seat until age 13.

7. Always make sure that older children who use booster seats or seat belts are buckled with both the lap and shoulder belt. Both the lap and shoulder belt are needed for proper protection.

8. Use proper restraints on every trip.

- a. Buckle children in car seats, booster seats, or seat belts on every trip—no matter how short the trip may be.

9. Parents and caregivers can set a good example by always wearing a seat belt.

Child passenger safety is a community issue. Children look up to older peers and adults and follow their lead. By wearing a seat belt every trip, you can prevent avoidable tragedies and make the road safer for everyone.

Buckle Up for Safety!

Dr. Rachel Cash,
Medical Director, Indiana Market



REFERENCES:

- 1. **Child Passenger Safety | Child Passenger Safety | CDC** <https://www.cdc.gov/child-passenger-safety/about/index.html>
- 2. **Preventing Child Passenger Injury | Child Passenger Safety | CDC** <https://www.cdc.gov/child-passenger-safety/prevention/index.html>
- 3. **Booster Seat Requirements Indiana | Car Seat Laws** <https://www.wkw.com/indiana-car-seat-laws>
- 4. **CJI: Traffic Safety: Project LOVE** <https://www.in.gov/cji/traffic-safety/project-love>