

# Boosters for Big Kids

## Protecting School-Age Children

Child  
Safety  
Facts  
2020

### Car safety basics

- Your child should use a car safety seat (car seat) with a harness for as long as possible, until at least age 4. After she outgrows the car seat, your child should ride in a booster seat.
- ALWAYS follow booster seat and car instructions.
- A lap-shoulder belt **MUST** be used with a booster. **NEVER** use only a lap belt with a booster.
- If your car has no lap-shoulder belts in the back seat, see the other side of this sheet.
- Teach your child how to buckle up and to pull up on the shoulder belt to make the lap part of the belt snug.
- Keep children under age 13 in the back. The back seat is safer, even if there is no air bag in front.
- The center of the back seat is safest. It is farthest away from impact in a crash. However, a child in a booster **MUST** sit where there is a shoulder belt.
- ALWAYS use your seat belt. Your child learns from watching what you do. Make sure *everyone* in the car buckles up.
- Make sure that others who drive your child know that you expect her to use a car seat or booster.

### WARNING!

Always secure a booster with a seat belt or LATCH when it is not being used. A loose booster can be thrown around in a sudden stop or crash and could injure people in the car.

Make  
Every Ride  
A Safe Ride



### Car seat or booster—safer than a seat belt alone

#### How long should a child ride in a car seat?

Your child should use a car seat with a harness as long as possible. It will usually give more protection than a booster or a seat belt. Forward-facing car seats fit children who weigh less than 40 pounds, and most can be used up to 65 pounds or more.

#### Keep your child in a car seat until:

- The child's ears are above the top of the car seat, or
- The child's shoulders are above the top shoulder strap position, or
- The child's weight is at the car seat's upper limit (check the label or instructions).

When your child outgrows a car seat with a harness, he or she needs a booster seat.

#### What is a booster? What does it do?

A booster seat raises the child so the lap and shoulder belts fit properly (picture, top right). Using a booster in the rear seat reduces a child's risk of injury by almost 60 percent. A booster also makes the child more comfortable and allows him to see out of the window better.

#### A booster is **NOT** the best choice if:

- The child weighs too little or is too short for a booster.
- The child is too wiggly to sit still in a booster.
- There is no shoulder belt to use with the booster.

In these cases, the child should ride in a car seat. One that fits heavier children might be needed. (See *Resources*.)

#### Why can't my child ride in just a seat belt?

Seat belts are made to fit adults. They do not fit most children until they are age 10 to 12. If the lap belt crosses the child's belly (picture, bottom right), it could cause serious injuries in a crash. If the shoulder belt is across the neck, a child might move it behind his back or under his arm. That also could cause severe injuries.

#### When will my child be big enough to use a seat belt?

**Use the 5-Step Test\* to find out.** Seat your child on the car's back seat with the seat belt on. Check the steps below. If you answer "yes" to *all* of these questions, your child is big enough to use that seat belt without a booster.

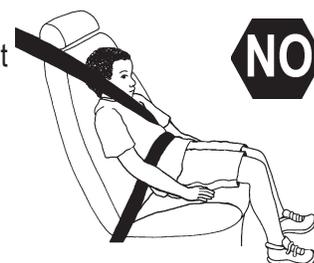
- Can your child sit with a straight back against the vehicle seat back?
- In that position, do his legs bend comfortably at the edge of the vehicle seat?
- Does the lap belt stay low, touching his thighs (and *not* crossing his belly)?
- Does the shoulder belt cross the center of his shoulder?
- Can your child sit this way without slouching during a long ride?

Note: Cars are not all the same, so do this test for any seat belt your child uses.

\* Adapted from SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.'s 5-Step Test, [www.carseat.org](http://www.carseat.org)



A booster helps a seat belt fit properly. This is a backless booster.

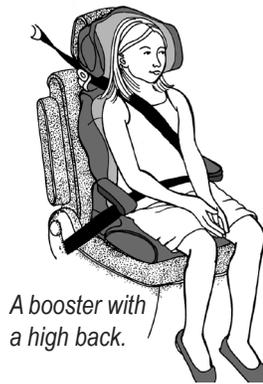


This child has poor belt fit. He is too small to ride using only a seat belt.

## Kinds of Booster Seats

Most boosters fit children who weigh from 40 to over 100 pounds.

- **Booster with a high back** (pictured): This type helps prevent neck injuries if your car has low seatbacks. It may also provide better head protection in side crashes. The high back also helps keep a sleeping child in place.
- **Combination seat:** This kind of car seat has a harness for a child who is smaller than the size limit. Take the harness off the car seat to make it a booster for a larger child.



A booster with a high back.

- **Booster with no back:** A backless booster (shown on page 1) is fine if the vehicle seat has a head restraint and your child does not sleep in the car. Older children may like them because they look more “grown up.”

## Choosing and using a booster correctly

A child in a booster must use a lap-shoulder belt. NEVER use a lap belt only. ALWAYS follow instructions.

**Proper fit of the seat belt is important.** Choose a booster that makes your car’s seat belt fit your child correctly. Take your child with you when shopping for a booster.

### To check for proper fit:

- Place your child on the booster and buckle the seat belt around him. Use the booster’s seat belt guides.
- Check the lap belt position. It should be on top of the thighs or very low on the hips.
- Check the shoulder belt position. It should go across the middle of the shoulder. Most boosters have shoulder belt guides. Adjust these to help with proper fit. Make sure the belt slides through the guide easily.

**Note:** See the resources section for a website that rates booster models on how likely they will fit a child properly.

## Air Bag Warning

In a crash, an opening air bag can injure or kill a child. The danger is greatest for rear-facing children. However, older children are also at risk.

All children are safer in the rear. If a forward-facing child must sit in front, make sure the child is secured in a car seat or booster. Move the vehicle seat all the way back, away from the dashboard.

Also, make sure the air bag is turned off. You may need to turn off a switch in a sports car or pickup truck that has a very small or no back seat. (Turn it on again for larger passengers.) Newer cars have sensors that turn the front air bag off. Check the light on the dashboard.

If there are side air bags in the back seat, make sure your child does not lean against the side of the car while riding.

**Check the car manual for more information about air bags.**

## Cars with only lap belts in back

A booster seat *cannot* be used with only a lap belt. Instead, use:

- A car seat with a harness that holds larger children (picture, right). It is okay to install a car seat using a lap belt. Attaching the tether makes the car seat much safer. Some seats *require* tether use at higher child weights.
- A vest or safety harness. These require a tether strap to be used. (See EZ-ON Products in *Resources*.)



A car seat for larger children, used with a lap belt and tether.

## Using seat belts correctly

**When your child is big enough,** teach her how to wear the seat belt correctly. (Adults need to buckle up correctly, too.)

**Lap belt fit is important.** The belt must be low and snug, touching the top of the thighs. Teach your child to push the lap belt down and to make it snug (picture, below).

It is hard to keep the lap belt snug and low if a child is wearing a heavy jacket. Remove the jacket or pull it up or to the sides so the lap belt can go under it.

**A lap-shoulder belt gives much better protection** than only a lap belt. It should cross the middle of the shoulder.

Make sure your child does *not* put the shoulder belt behind her back or under her arm. Doing so can cause serious injury.

Some cars have built-in shoulder belt height adjusters (see the owner’s manual). These make the shoulder belt fit better. Avoid using add-on shoulder belt adjusters that did not come with the car. They do not have crash safety standards. They often make the seat belt too loose or pull the lap belt too high. This can cause serious injury.



Correct seat belt fit

**Be sure children do not use seat belts as playthings.** A seat belt wrapped around the neck is very dangerous.

## Resources

**Auto Safety Hotline:** 888-327-4236, 800-424-9153 (tty), [www.safercar.gov](http://www.safercar.gov)

**American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP):** [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)  
(See AAP’s product listing to find car seats with high weight limits.)

**SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.:** 800-745-7233, [www.carseat.org](http://www.carseat.org)

**Insurance Institute for Highway Safety:** [www.iihs.org](http://www.iihs.org) (booster fit ratings)

**EZ-ON Products** (harnesses/vests): 800-323-6598, [www.ezonpro.com](http://www.ezonpro.com)

**Find someone to help:** 866-732-8243, or look online:

- [www.seatcheck.org](http://www.seatcheck.org) (select Inspection under Installation Help)
- <http://cert.safekids.org> (select Find a Tech)