

Child Safety Seat Guidelines

Children are safest in the car when they use the correct safety seat based on their height and weight and the seat is properly installed.

Stage 1

Rear-facing car seat
Infants and toddlers



A rear-facing car seat has a harness and will protect your child's head, neck and spine. A 5-point harness gives the best protection for your child. Starting in 2020, children under age 2 in Washington State must use rear-facing car seats. Keep your child in a rear-facing car seat for as long as possible, until they reach the highest weight or height allowed by their seat. If your child starts with a rear-facing-only seat, they should continue to ride rear-facing in a convertible or all-in-one seat until they reach the upper rear-facing size limits for their seat.

Stage 2

Forward-facing car seat
Toddlers and preschoolers



Your child will be ready for a forward-facing car seat with a harness when they reach their top height and weight limit allowed for their rear-facing car seat (check the manufacturer's instructions). A 5-point harness gives the best protection for your child. Use a forward-facing car seat until they are at least 40 pounds. Many seats can be used for children up to 65 pounds.

Stage 3

Booster seat
School-aged children



Once your child outgrows their forward-facing car seat it is the law that they use a booster seat with a lap and shoulder belt until they are 4 foot 9 inches tall. A booster will raise your child so their lap and shoulder belts fit properly – this will keep them as safe as possible until they are ready for a seat belt. Your child may need to use a booster for many years depending on how quickly they grow. Some children are not ready for a seat belt until they are 12 years old.

Your child can safely ride without a booster seat once all of these steps are met:

1. Child's back rests against the vehicle seat
2. Child's knees bend at the edge of the seat
3. Lap belt rests on top of thighs (not the belly)
4. Shoulder belt lies between the neck and shoulder
5. Child does not slouch or play with the seat belt

Stage 4

Seat belt
Older children



If your child is younger than 13, they should continue to sit in the back seat. Wearing a seat belt is the law. Your child will be more likely to wear their seat belt during every ride if they see that you and others in the car wear one too.

What kinds of car seats are there?

Infant car seat

An infant car seat is used rear-facing and is designed for newborns and small babies.



Convertible seat

A convertible seat may be used with children of various sizes and can change from a rear-facing seat to a forward-facing seat with a harness and tether.



All-in-one seat

An all-in-one seat may be used with children of various sizes and can change from a rear-facing seat to a forward-facing seat with a harness and to a booster seat.



Combination seat

A combination seat can transition from a forward-facing seat with a harness and tether into a booster seat.



Booster seat

A booster seat is a car seat without a harness. Children use a booster seat when they are too big for a car seat but not big enough for an adult seat belt. A no-back booster seat can be used in cars with headrests in the back seat. A high-back booster can be used in cars with or without headrests.



Child safety seat tips

- When shopping for a seat for your child, choose a seat that fits your child's size and can be installed correctly in your vehicle. A seat that costs more isn't necessarily safer.
- Check your child's car seat label regularly to make sure your child meets the height and weight range of the child safety seat.
- Secure your child in their safety seat without coats or heavy jackets and then tighten the harness.
- Adjust your child's harness straps before every ride for the highest level of safety.
- Model safe practices by wearing a seat belt at all times while riding in the car.

To Learn More

- safekids.org/car-seat
- safercar.gov
- seattlechildrens.org/health-safety/keeping-kids-healthy/prevention/booster-seats
- seattlechildrens.org/health-safety/keeping-kids-healthy/prevention/car-seat-checks
- Your child's healthcare provider