

# Everything you need to know about child car seats

*Provided by Baby Bunting*

Choosing the right restraint for your child, vehicle and parenting needs isn't always easy.

Child car seat safety isn't something to mess around with, and this is designed to help you understand the different types of seats available, the laws around using child car seats, and current best-practice recommendations that you can implement.

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## **Common terms used when speaking about car seats**

- **Harnessed** – Car seats can restrain a child in two different ways, either with a 6-point harness or a seat belt. A 6-point harness has straps and a buckle built into the seat. Children under 4 years old must be restrained in a harnessed seat.
- **Rear-facing** – Rear-facing car seats position a child so that they are looking towards the back of the vehicle. They are generally more reclined than forward-facing car seats and keep children safer in the event of an accident due to the positioning of their head, neck, and spine.
- **Extended rear-facing** – Keeping a child rear-facing past the minimum age to turn them forward-facing is known as extended rear-facing. There are many models of car seat on the market that cater to extended rear-facing, typically allowing an average-sized child to face rearward until around 30 months of age (around 2.5 years old).
- **Forward-facing** – Forward-facing seats position a child, so they are facing the direction of travel. Forward-facing seats are positioned to be more upright than rear-facing seats are.
- **Recline** – Recline is how much of an angle the seat is at.
- **Padding** – Padding refers to any of the soft material included with your seat. There is generally padding included for newborn support, shoulder padding, and padding cushioning the crotch buckle.
- **Anchor point** – Anchor points are built into your vehicle and provide a stable and secure point to which you can attach a car seat top tether strap.
- **Tether strap** – The tether strap is designed to help with the stability of your child restraint if you're in an accident. It runs from the top of the seat through to the anchor point.

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## **Laws for using child car seats in Australia**

While legislation is generally consistent around Australia for how children should be kept safe in vehicles, there may be some small differences between states and territories.

Before choosing your child car seat, check out laws in your State.

## Understanding the difference between law and best practice

The law is the minimum legal requirement for travelling with your child in a vehicle. It's what you must do to avoid a fine if you get pulled over.

It's great to know what you legally need to do, and there are also some extra ways you can make sure your child is kept as safe as possible every time they travel in a vehicle.

Here's a handy cheat sheet to help show the difference between what is legally required and what is considered current best-practice by experts in the field of car safety for children. It will help answer important questions around how long your child can stay rear facing for, or what age you can turn your child facing forwards in their car seat.

<b>Your child's age</b>	<b>Current laws*</b>	<b>Best-practice guidelines</b>
0-6 months	Your child must be rear facing in a baby capsule or convertible seat.	Your child should be rear facing in a baby capsule or convertible car seat.
6 months-4 years	Your child can be rear facing in a capsule or convertible seat, or forward-facing in a convertible or harnessed car seat.	Keep your child rear-facing for as long as possible, ideally for a minimum of 12 months (or longer if your car seat caters for extended rear-facing). Turn them according to their seated height, using the car seat markers as your guide.
4 years-7 years	Your child must be forward-facing in a harnessed car seat or booster seat.	Your child must be forward-facing from this age, so keep them in a full 6-point harnessed seat for as long as possible. Avoid moving to a booster seat until they outgrow markers on harnessed seats.
7 years and older	Your child can sit in a standard seat or continue to use their car seat.	Keep your child in a booster seat until they are at least 145cm tall and can pass the 5-step test.

*\*Exact laws may vary slightly between states. This is a guide only.*

## **What are the types of baby and child car seats?**

Different types of child restraints are suited to different stages in life. When you're choosing a car seat, remember that the age for each seat type is just a guide as to how long you might expect a seat to fit your child. If your child is exceptionally tall, or very short, you might find they outgrow the seat early or get even longer than expected using the seat.

### **Baby capsule – 0-12 months**

**Type: A1/A1**

A baby capsule or infant carrier typically fits babies from 0-6 months or 0-12 months depending on the model. They have two parts – a secured base, and a carrier which clicks in and out of the base, allowing you to get baby in and out of the car while strapped into their capsule.

### **Convertible car seat – 0-4 years**

**Type: A4**

Convertible car seats are designed to be used rear-facing and forward-facing, allowing you to 'convert' them when your child meets the required size. They stay in your car (unless you need to adjust the seat or clean the cover) and you strap baby in and out each time.

### **Harnessed forward-facing car seat – 12 months-8 years**

**Type: G**

These seats allow you to keep your child harnessed for as long as possible. A 6-point harness helps distribute force more evenly and support your child's body more effectively than a seat belt in an

### **Convertible booster car seats – 12 months-8 years**

**Type: B/E**

These seats allow for harnessing until your child is around 4 years old, and then converts to a seat belt booster seat.

### **Seat belt booster seats – 4 years until outgrown**

**Type: E, F**

Seat belt booster seats are seats that raise your child to a height that allows a seat belt to fit their body correctly.

### **0-8 convertible car seats – 0-8 years**

**Type: A4/G**

These seats are suitable from birth, allowing for extended rear-facing until approximately 2.5 years old, and then transition into a forward-facing seat that can be used with a 6-point harness until approximately 8 years old.

## **Installing and using your child car seat**

Like all safety equipment, child car seats can only keep your little one safe if they are used correctly. This means the seat is installed correctly, and your child is secured properly inside the seat for every journey.

To install your car seat, you can either choose to use a professional car seat installation service, or you can read your product manual carefully and install it yourself.

Professional car seat installation services give you the peace of mind that your seat is installed correctly. As they fit hundreds of seats every week, they have extensive experience with a variety of car seat models, as well as experience fitting them to a range of vehicles.

As your little one grows, you will most likely need to remove and reinstall their car seat at some point. If you need to install your seat yourself, we recommend a quick visit to an installer afterwards to get an experienced pair of eyes to check your install.

It's also important to check your install regularly to ensure nothing has slipped, loosened, or twisted over time.

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*Tip: take photos of your newly installed car seat from a variety of angles as soon as the installer has finished and add them to a new album on your device. This way you can refer to the images quickly and easily when you need to install it yourself for the first time.*

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## **How to tighten a car seat harness correctly**

For a harness to do its job correctly, it needs to fit well and be tightened properly. In a worst-case scenario, the harness needs to hold your child secure if the seat is completely upside-down, so you want it to be firm and well-fitted.

To know if the harness is tight enough, you can do what is called the 'pinch test'.

1. Put your little one in their seat and tighten the harness.
2. Run your fingers vertically on one strap to try and pinch the strap.
3. If there is any slack, you will be able to pinch some strap material between your fingers.
4. If you cannot pinch any material together, you can be mostly confident the harness is tight enough.

In a restraint that is rear facing, to tighten the harness to get to this point you can reach to the back of the seat to find the splitter plate (the piece of metal that the straps attach to) and pull that down, which brings the straps firmly over your little one's body.

## **What is the correct height for harness straps on a child car seat?**

It's important to ensure the harness height on a car seat is adjusted correctly for your child as they grow. Having the correct harness height ensures it distributes force on your child's body and spine optimally, as well as making the seat comfier for your little one.

The height of the harness will depend on whether the seat is rear-facing or forward-facing.

**For rear-facing seats:** the harness straps must be level with, or slightly higher than, your child's shoulders. They must never dip below your child's shoulders.

**For forward-facing seats:** harness straps should be at the harness height setting closest to your child's shoulders. They can come from above **or** below your child's shoulders, but not more than 2.5cm either way.

**For both types of seats:** you will need to monitor the harness height regularly as little ones tend to grow rapidly!

## **Can children use lap-only belts?**

There are many risks associated with placing a child or young adult in a lap-only seat belt. This form of vehicle restraint offers little upper body protection and can cause significant injury if there is a collision.

Injuries from these belts have been grouped into a category called "lap-belt syndrome" – a collection of abdominal, lumbar spine and spinal cord injuries, which tend to occur in people who are in a motor vehicle crash while wearing improperly fitted lap belts or three-point restraints (lap-sash belts) who have moved the sash part of the belt to sit behind their back.

It is recommended to avoid lap-only seatbelts for children of any age and investigate alternative safety restraint options instead.

## **What types of accessories can be used with car seats?**

There are many different car seat accessories available to purchase. Some of them are intended to improve the fit or comfort of your child when using the car seat, some are designed for entertainment or visibility, and some are intended to protect your car.

While it's great to want to help your child be as safe as possible while driving, there are a few important things to keep in mind when considering car seat accessories.

**Tip: in an accident, anything not well-secured in your car may become a projectile. If you aren't comfortable throwing something at your baby or child's face, reconsider whether it's essential to have while you're driving.**

## **Universal car seat accessories which are considered safe when used properly**

There are some accessories which are generally accepted for use in most cars and with most car seats. These include:

- Tether extenders – some vehicles have the tether anchor points located too far for the standard tether which comes with the car seat. In this case, you will need a tether extender. Tether extenders are universal and suit most seats and most vehicles.
- Mirrors – mirrors are generally able to be used with most vehicles. It's important that mirrors are fastened to the headrest securely to avoid them becoming a danger to your child, and it should be installed so that it is out of reach of your child.
- Gated buckles or clamps – if you're installing your car seat using the seat belt to anchor it securely, you may want to use a gated buckle or belt clamp. This helps prevent the belt from slipping and loosening over time, maintaining a tight, secure installation (though it's still important to check the install regularly).
- Sunshades – no one likes the sun in their eyes! Sunshades can generally be used in most vehicles to help keep the glare out of your little one's face.

## **Car seat accessories to avoid**

There are other accessories that should never be used as they present an immediate or potential safety risk. While that risk may not be apparent, it's enough when you consider that at best, the product may not have been tested with your specific model of car seat, so you cannot be sure what could happen with the setup in an accident.

These types of products include aftermarket accessories like forehead supporters and loose rolled blankets to support an infant's position.

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*Tip: consider your child's clothing carefully before strapping them into their seat. Are they wearing a headband that might slip down and become dangerous? Are they wearing a hood which pushes their head forward into an unsafe position for breathing? Are they wearing bulky clothes which may compress in an accident leaving their harness too loose? Is their skin covered by clothing to avoid rubbing from straps?*

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