

This factsheet presents background information mainly for people working with children and families, and students undertaking projects.

It aims to answer some of the most commonly asked questions about the safe carriage of children in cars and other vehicles, the use of child restraints and the related law. More information can be obtained from **capt's** leaflet *How safe is your child in the car?* A sample of this leaflet can be downloaded from **capt's** website www.capt.org.uk, where you can also find out how to purchase bulk supplies.

Child Accident Prevention Trust publishes a range of resources for parents, carers and older children, containing comprehensive safety advice. A complete list of these resources – leaflets, booklets, posters, guides, etc – can be found at www.capt.org.uk together with details of how to obtain them.

How many children are injured in crashes?

In 2008 for children under 16 years, almost 9,400 were injured as car occupants in collisions reported to the police in the UK (see table below).

	Killed	Seriously injured	Slightly injured	All severities
England and Wales	36	384	7,769	8,189
Scotland	13	57	510	580
Northern Ireland	3	25	595	623
Great Britain	49	441	8,279	8,769
United Kingdom	52	466	8,874	9,392

What is the law about carrying children in cars and other vehicles?

(The information provided here is not a definitive nor complete description of the law.)

New regulations governing the way we carry children in cars and other vehicles fitted with seat belts came into force on 18 September 2006 in England, Scotland and Wales and on 27 February 2007 in Northern Ireland.

In simple terms, the law requires ALL children to be carried in child restraints that are appropriate for their size with very few exceptions (see below). The new law simply reflects what has long been regarded as best practice.

The law covers children under 12 years old, but only if they are less than 135 cm (about 4ft 5in) in height. If a child is taller than 135 cm they are allowed to use an adult seat belt, regardless of their age.

- Some specific issues

Children under 3 years are not allowed to travel in the front or rear of a motor vehicle unless they are in an appropriate child restraint.

Children aged between 3 and 11 years, but less than 135 cm in height, are required to use an appropriate child restraint in the rear of motor vehicles provided there is a seat belt that can be used to secure the child restraint.

The new regulations do not apply to minibuses, buses and coaches for the present.

- Exemptions

Children do not have to use an appropriate child restraint in the following circumstances:

- in licensed taxis or licensed hire cars if an appropriate child restraint is not available - children aged 3 years or above must use the adult seat belt in the rear. A child under 3 years old may travel unrestrained but in the rear only - this is the only exemption for a child under 3 years old.
- for a child aged 3 and over who, because of an unexpected necessity, is travelling over a short distance in a passenger car or light goods vehicle where there is no appropriate child restraint - the adult seat belt in the rear must be used instead. (This exemption is not intended to cover regular school runs and similar journeys.)
- for a child aged 3 or more riding in the rear of a vehicle with two other children in child restraints where there is not room for a third child restraint - the adult seat belt in the rear must be used instead.
- for a disabled child who needs to use a disabled seat belt where none is available

Contact your road safety officer (via your local council in England and Wales, the police in Scotland or road safety education officers through the Education and Library boards in Northern Ireland.) if you have any queries regarding the legislation. Detailed FAQs and access to a leaflet on the law can be found, for GB, at the <http://www.dft.gov.uk/think/focusareas/children/childincar?page=Overview> or, for Northern Ireland, <http://www.roadsafetyni.gov.uk/index/cars/newseatbeltregulations/informationleaflet.htm>.

Is it safe for two children to travel in one seat belt?

No. Seats belts are designed and tested to restrain one person, not two.

Is it safe for me to put my seat belt around both my child and myself when my child is on my lap?

No. In a crash your child would be squashed between you and the belt. It would be like jumping off the roof of your house on to your child on the ground. And it is illegal.

Is it safe for me to carry my child on my lap if I wear a seat belt?

No. You would not be able to hold on to your child even in a slow speed collision. Holding a small baby in a 30mph crash would require the sort of strength needed to lift eight bags of cement at the same time. Remember also that to carry a child on your lap is illegal. (See above).

Can my child travel in the front seat?

The law says “yes” as long as the child is appropriately restrained, but **capt’s** advice is that all children are safer in the back seat. **If you have an airbag in the front passenger seat, never use a rear-facing baby seat in the front unless the airbag is switched off – use it in the back seat instead.**

I’m only travelling round the corner to the park. Do I need to put my child into a restraint for such a short journey?

Yes. Most crashes happen within a short distance of home at speeds lower than 30mph. You need to restrain your child **every** journey.

I saw a car with five children in the back seat yesterday. Isn’t it illegal?

As the first question on this factsheet explains, all children under a certain size and age have to be properly restrained in child restraints, so the answer is “Yes, it is illegal”. If the children are over the size and age limits they must use adult seat belts.

Can I use a seat that I bought in the US in Britain?

Child restraints used in this country must by law conform to the international regulation, ECE Regulation 44. Child restraints that comply **only** with the standards from countries outside the European Union cannot legally be used in the UK.

I have seen a magazine article about car seats which says that some aren't fitted correctly. How do I know if mine is fitted right?

Most child restraints work well in most cars. But there are exceptions. Follow the advice below to get a good fit:

- **Try** the child restraint in your car, **before you buy** it.
- Fix the restraint into the car as tightly as you can, exactly to the manufacturer's instructions. It shouldn't move significantly to the front or side.
- The seat belt buckle should not rest on the frame of the child seat.
- If you are having problems, it's worth trying a different position in the car.

If you are worried about your seat, contact the manufacturer's helpline (you may be able to buy a fitting kit to secure it) or contact your road safety officer who may be able to recommend somewhere local to get your child restraint checked. In England and Wales, your road safety officer can be contacted at your local town or county hall. In Scotland, contact your regional council or the police. In Northern Ireland look up Department of the Environment in the telephone book. The website, www.childcarsafety.org.uk, gives contact details for road safety officers and child restraint manufacturers.

I've heard that lap belts are dangerous for children. Is it safe to carry my child in a lap belt?

Seat belts, whether lap/shoulder belts or lap belts, are not the best way of restraining children because they are designed for adults. The best restraints for children are those designed for their size. However, for children who are over the size and age limits that require them to use child restraints, if used properly lap belts are better than no restraint at all. They can be used perfectly satisfactory to hold many types of child restraints in place. See below.

If you have to use a lap belt for a child, make sure that it is on the child's hips, not their stomach, and that it is tightly adjusted.

What child seats can be used with a centre lap belt?

Not baby seats; one or two forward-facing seat group I seats (usually with an integral harness); not usually booster seats or booster cushions, but there may be some exceptions. Check the instructions with your seat to see if it can be held in by a lap belt.

My son is five. Can he use an adult

Only if he is more than 1.35m tall (which would be unusual). Even then he will be better protected if he can still use a child restraint. An appropriate child restraint for your son's weight and age will protect him much better than a seat belt that is designed for an adult. Seat belts tend to lie on the abdomen and neck on small children rather than the pelvis, chest and shoulder with an adult (the strongest parts of the body). Your son would be better protected using a booster seat or booster cushion to improve the way the seat belt lies across his body until he is ten or eleven years old.

My child is always releasing himself from his child seat. What can I do to prevent this?

There is no easy answer to this problem – it is one of the most common child restraint problems. As they begin to explore the world around them children are attracted to the brightly coloured button on the child restraint harness. Often this happens with children aged 18 months to four years.

If it becomes a real problem, you could try these methods:

- Stop the car and explain to your child that you aren't going until they are properly restrained. It takes a few times but persevere!
- Try distracting your child with games like I-Spy or pointing at things outside of the car.
- Fit a play tray to the child seat. This gives a child something to play with and hides the buckles. It can be easily removed in the event of a crash to release a child from the restraints.
- Using a booster seat – one in which the seat belt goes around the front of the child – may help as the release button for the seat belt is not obvious to the child. Borrow one from a relative or friend to see if it makes any difference.
- Put the child restraint in the front so that you can see what is going on – but take care that you aren't distracted from driving.

Do not tape or cover up the release button. In a crash, or if the car catches fire, it is essential that you or a would-be rescuer can free all the passengers quickly.

My baby is too big, too long or too heavy for a rear-facing baby seat. What shall I do?

There are four possible situations to do with the baby's size that cause problems:

- Your baby's legs are pressed hard against the back of the car seat.
- Your baby's head now sticks out beyond the top of the baby seat.
- Your baby is too broad, usually at the shoulders, to fit in the seat.
- Your baby exceeds the weight limit for a seat but the baby is young and not strong enough to use a forward-facing seat.

The first thing to remember is that babies, and children, are usually safer in the 'younger' type of child restraint. In practical terms, this means that you should not move your baby from a rear-facing seat into a forward-facing one until absolutely necessary, as they can suffer serious neck injury in a crash if carried forward when they are not strong enough. Do not move your baby to a forward-facing seat until they can sit up for long periods of time unaided when you seat them on the floor.

Ideally, we would all be better off being carried backwards, with strong head and neck support, as this would provide the best protection in a crash.

If the problem is to do with the length of your baby's legs, in safety terms this is not a problem. They will not suffer injuries in a crash because of this – it is more a matter of comfort. Because you usually use the baby seat for relatively short periods, our advice is that you carry on using the seat until it is essential that you change to a different type of restraint.

However, if the problem is that the baby's head is sticking out beyond the top of the baby seat, you either have to use a larger rear-facing seat, or as a second choice, change to a forward-facing one. This is because in a crash the baby's head would not be cocooned by the baby seat and may hit part of the car. Try using a two-way seat, one that can be used both rear-facing and then forward-facing. Two-way seats tend to be bigger than seats that can only be used rear-facing. Remember that some rear-facing seats – so called Group 0+ seats – can carry a baby up to 13kg so may solve the length problem.

For most babies that are too broad for a forward-facing seat, using a Group 0+ or two-way seat will usually solve the problem.

Some young babies exceed the weight limit for rear-facing seats but are not strong enough to use a forward-facing seat. These babies need Group 0+ seats or a two-way seat, used rear-facing.

My baby was premature and looks tiny in the rear-facing baby seat. Is he safe?

Your baby will be well protected in a baby seat even though he looks very small. Manufacturers do not recommend that you put a rolled up nappy or towel under the baby to allow him to lie flatter. To give his head more sideway support you can buy special pillows for baby seats or again, use a rolled up towel.

Help! I'm about to have my fourth child and I can't get four child seats and two adults in the car. What shall I do?

There is no easy answer to this question. The options are:

- Use a "people carrier" as these have a third row of seats with belts and may be more suitable for large families.
- Visit a specialist in-car safety centre where it may be possible to fit a fourth seat belt to the rear seat – this will be expensive.

Do not put two children in one belt or carry children in the luggage area behind the rear seat unless it is equipped by the car manufacturer for passengers. Remember that all children have to use a restraint appropriate for their age in most vehicles. (See the first question on this factsheet about the law.)

I have to carry four adults and a nine year old in my car (plus driver). There are not enough seat belts for all of us. Who should wear the seatbelts?

The law requires that all children are properly restrained and this is the only safe answer.

Child restraints are so expensive. Is it a good idea to buy a two-way seat to save money?

A two way seat is one that starts off as a rear-facing baby seat and then changes to a forward-facing toddler seat when the child is physically mature enough to be carried facing forwards.

Two-way seats are a compromise, due to the large difference in size between a new born baby and a four year old child. They can be very bulky and difficult to install and remove from the car with babies in them. However, they are useful for young babies who are long or broad and have outgrown a baby seat, but who are not strong enough to move to a forward-facing seat.

Remember that you will probably not be able to carry your baby to and from the car in a two-way seat as you can with a baby seat because it will be too heavy.

All the child restraints are out of my price range. Can I buy second-hand?

Child seats are the piece of safety equipment that capt would recommend you buy new whenever possible. This is because:

- You will not know for certain the history of a piece of second-hand equipment – it is difficult to know if it has been in a crash as the damage may not be readily visible. A damaged seat might not provide full protection in involved in another crash.
- It is vital to fit car seats according to the instructions and often the booklets are missing from second-hand seats.
- Second-hand seats may not comply with the most recent, and hence the best, safety standards.

Rather than buying a new seat from a shop, see if a safety equipment loan scheme operates locally. Your council's road safety officer, your maternity unit or the health visitor should be able to provide you with information.

Avoid at all costs buying second-hand safety equipment from car boot sales or the small ads in local papers. To be absolutely sure of the safety of the piece of equipment there is no real alternative to buying a new child safety seat.

Our car was involved in a crash that was not serious. Should I get a new child restraint?

If you want to be 100% sure that your child restraint will work properly in another crash, you should buy a new restraint. This is because it is difficult to decide how serious that crash has been and damage to the seat may not be visible. You may be able to claim the cost of a new seat from your insurance company – some insurers now advertise this service. Contact the child seat manufacturer for guidance on whether you should replace the seat: you will usually find their telephone number in the seat's instructions.

Further information

For information on other child safety topics see **capt's** website at www.capt.org.uk or write to us at the address below.

Detailed FAQs and access to a leaflet on the law can be found at the Department for Transport's website <http://www.dft.gov.uk/think/focusareas/children/childincarcar?page=Overview>

Comprehensive information about all aspects of child car safety seats is available through the website developed by the Department for Transport and RoSPA, <http://www.childcarsafety.org.uk/>.

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CHILD ACCIDENT PREVENTION TRUST Canterbury Court (1.09) 1-3 Brixton Road LONDON SW9 6DE
t 020 7608 3828 f 020 7608 3674 e safe@capt.org.uk www.capt.org.uk

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