

[12 Car Seat Safety Mistakes You May Be Making](#)

Direct Buy Warranty Staff - [September 12, 2014](#)



You're using a car seat, so your child must be safe in your vehicle — right? Not necessarily. Car seats are of course designed to protect your child in case of an accident, but if you don't use them correctly, your child may not be as safe as you think. Mistakes like loose installation or incorrectly used harnesses, turning children forward facing too soon, or even washing car seat straps can be deadly in an accident. Are you making one of these common — but dangerous — car seat safety mistakes?

Car Seat Mistake #1: Incorrect Chest Clip Positioning

According to a [recent survey](#) from NHTSA, incorrect chest clip positioning is among the most significant and common mistakes made with car seats. And it's also one of the easiest to fix!

Often, parents put together the chest clip, but fail to position it correctly. This leaves the clip too low, often on the abdomen. If the chest clip is too low, it's possible your child's harness straps could slide off of their shoulders, making it possible for them to be ejected from their car seat in a crash.

Additionally, a chest clip on the abdomen can cause damage or internal bleeding in an accident, as the abdomen is not protected by the ribcage as the chest is.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Chest clips should be on the chest. A good rule of thumb is to align the clip with your child's armpits.

Car Seat Mistake #2: Loose Car Seat Installation

Another top mistake on NHTSA's list, loose car seat installations are a dangerous mistake. In fact, car seat inspectors say this is the number one mistake parents make. Car seats come with LATCH system equipment and tethers to help with proper installation. Alternatively, you can use your car's seat belts. Either way, car seats that move more than one inch side to side or front to back is too much.

Car seats that move an inch or more are dangerous in a car crash, as the impact and aftermath can cause serious damage to your child as they are shaken. They can even cause injury to your child's face or head if the car seat crashes into the back of the front seat.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Ensure that your car seat can only move an inch — ideally, less. If your vehicle has the LATCH system, use it, and be sure to secure the top tether as tightly as it will go. If you're using a seat belt, tighten it as much as possible while putting your knee or arm in the seat to depress it. Adding your weight to the seat will better secure a LATCH system seat as well. Be sure to lock the seat belt, too. Warning: Do not use both LATCH and seat belts at the same time. Use one or the other, but not both, as doing so can be dangerous and does not add security. In fact, using both may transfer too much force to the child or plastic, causing it to break.

Car Seat Mistake #3: Loose Car Seat Harness

A loose harness is not a safe harness. The [NHTSA](#) recommends that there should be no slack between the child and the harness strap, but often, parents leave more than two inches of total slack, creating a dangerous situation.

But you should also watch out for a harness that's too tight. "Yes, there is such a thing as too tight," says Amie Durocher of [Safe Ride 4 Kids](#). "The straps are designed to have some give so that they can take the energy of the crash. If the seat is too tight that crash energy will be dispersed to the child."

With a loose harness, children are at risk of excessive movement, and possibly even ejection. Serious injury or death could occur if the child is able to hit part of the car's interior, another passenger, or is ejected from the vehicle entirely. Even if the child does not come out of the seat, excessive shaking in a crash can damage the brain and other internal organs.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Tighten harness straps as closely as they will go without sacrificing safety. The NHTSA says that there should be no slack if you pinch the strap at the child's shoulder. But also watch out for too-tight straps.

Car Seat Mistake #4: Incorrect Harness Slots

Car seats are designed to grow with children, which is why they offer adjustable straps that can be moved for the proper fit. In a rear facing seat, the harness should fit at or just below the child's

shoulders. For forward facing seats, harness slots should be at or above the child's shoulders. If your child grows, you may need to move the straps.

Using the wrong harness slot puts your child at risk, as they may be less secure in the event of a crash.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Regularly check your child's car seat fit to make sure you're using the correct slot. Ensure that rear facing harnesses are at or just below the shoulders, and that forward facing harnesses are at or just above the shoulders.

Car Seat Mistake #5: Incorrect Seat Belt Placement

As children move to booster seats and use seat belts instead of a built in harness, it becomes more difficult to ensure proper placement and use. Belt positioning boosters are designed to help ensure that seat belts are placed correctly, but only if they fit and are used properly.

With an improperly placed lap belt, children may not be well restrained in a crash, and may experience abdominal injury if their hips slide under the lap belt. A shoulder belt used improperly can allow forward movement or cause damage to the face and neck if positioned nearby.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Make sure that your child's lap belt fits snugly across the upper thighs. The lap belt should not be on the stomach. Shoulder belts should be snug across the shoulder and chest, avoiding the neck or face.

Car Seat Mistake #6: Using an Expired or Used Seat

Car seats are built to last and protect your children for years, and many families find that they are able to use car seats for two or more children. Typically, car seats can be safely used for five years, often more. But even though they're made to last, they aren't safe forever, and car seats come with expiration dates that should be respected.

Car seats with materials that have worn down are dangerous, and may not protect your child as designed. Seat belts can develop hairline fractures or imperfections that you can't see, but may break open in a crash. Over time, belts may loosen, making it difficult to get a safe, snug fit.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Know the expiration date for your child's seat. It is typically molded directly into the very bottom of the seat near where the child's legs rest. You may also find it on a sticker, but be sure to look for the molding if you don't see an expiration sticker. This information will tell you the month and year when the car seat is no longer safe to use. Additionally, it's *never* a good idea to buy a used seat, especially from a thrift store or someone you don't know. Used seats may have been involved in a crash, causing unseen damage that makes it unsafe. If you don't know a seat's entire history, steer clear. And of course, if your car seat is involved in a crash, consult the seat's manufacturer for their recommendation on whether you should continue to use it or not.

Car Seat Mistake #7: Turning Car Seats Forward Facing Too Early

In many states, the law allows parents to use forward facing car seats as long as the child is at least one year and weighs 20 pounds or more, but the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends that children remain rear facing until at least age two, or longer if they can still fit in their rear facing car seat.

The AAP has made this recommendation because the rear facing position is simply much safer than forward facing. Children under the age of two are [75% less likely to be seriously injured or die](#) in a rear facing seat. Riding forward facing too early puts children at risk of head and spinal cord injuries.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Rear face as long as your child continues to fit in the rear facing position. That means waiting until they reach the top height or weight limit allowed by the manufacturer. Don't worry if their legs seem cramped: [experts insist](#) that many children are more comfortable this way, and a rear facing position protects children better from leg injuries than forward facing.

Car Seat Mistake #8: Strapping Around Heavy Winter Coats

Winter coats protect your child outdoors, but they are a hazard when mixed with a car seat. Heavy coats, especially filled coats can create too much space between your child and car seat harness straps.

Heavy coats can compress, especially filled coats. In a crash, this compression can be deadly, allowing your child to be thrown around in the seat or even ejected. Anything that comes between your child and their car seat straps is a serious hazard.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Avoid using heavy coats in the car. Ideally, children shouldn't wear more in their car seat than what they'd wear indoors, like a sweater or long shirt. If that's not enough, keep your child both warm and safe by putting their arms through their jacket backwards over the harness. Younger children can use a blanket tucked around the straps.

Car Seat Mistake #9: Using Aftermarket Products

Take a trip to your local baby store, and you'll find an entire selection of car seat accessories: toys that strap on, bundle sets, mirrors, harness covers and other items designed to make your baby's ride more fun and comfortable. The problem is that while they're more fun and comfortable, they may not be safe, adding compression space or even becoming a projectile. "Remember everything in your car not belted down becomes a flying projectile during a crash," says Durocher. "If you wouldn't throw it at your child at 30 mph, don't have it unstrapped in the car." Anything that didn't come in the box with your car seat should be avoided and may compromise the effectiveness of your car seat.

Accessories like infant inserts (not provided by the manufacturer) may make your car seat less safe by providing extra space and the possibility of compression in a crash. Using them can also void your warranty, as car seat manufacturers do not test the safety effectiveness of seats using aftermarket products. Items like toys and mirrors can easily become dangerous projectiles in a crash.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Just don't use them. It's tempting, especially if you're given items as a gift, but it's dangerous to use products that weren't originally included with your car seat. Only strap covers

and infant inserts that your manufacturer provides have been tested for safety and can be trusted. If your child needs extra warmth in the car, swaddle or cover them with a blanket over the harness.

Car Seat Mistake #10: Using the Wrong Seat

Car seats are only safe if your child has the right fit and position, and obviously, as your child grows, that will change over time. Sitting in a too small or too large seat is dangerous. Most commonly, parents move children up to the next seat too soon. Preschoolers are especially at risk, as many parents may feel their children are ready for a booster as soon as they turn 4. However, it's only safe to switch to a booster seat when a child has reached the highest height or weight allowed by the manufacturer. The same goes for older children who may not be ready to move out of a booster seat yet.

Using the wrong seat is clearly dangerous, as a seat with an incorrect fit will not protect your child as much as a correct one will. Incorrect positioning or ineffective straps may make it possible for your child to be shaken or ejected from the seat.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Consult your manufacturer's information to determine whether your child is still in the correct sized car seat or not. A five-point harness provides much more safety than even a well-positioned car seat belt, and belt positioning boosters are often essential to getting the correct (and safe) position for older children. Become aware of height and weight limits to determine whether or not your child is ready to move up to the next seat. Visit SaferCar.gov to find car seat recommendations for your child's age.

Car Seat Mistake #11: Placing Infants at the Wrong Angle

Infant car seats often just pop right into a base. And then you're done. Right? Wrong. Infants should be placed at a 45 degree angle for safety. Many car seats come with recline indicators that can show whether you're properly angled or not.

Placing infants at the wrong angle is dangerous, as babies do not have strong neck control. If they're unable to keep their head up, or their head rolls to their chest while sleeping, their airway may be blocked. A seat that is too reclined is dangerous as well, interfering with crash performance.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Check your car seat for proper angle every time, especially if you've moved the seat. The safest position for infants is a 45 degree angle, rear facing.

Car Seat Mistake #12: Washing Car Seat Straps

Car seat straps can get really gross. With spitup, drool, food, and grimy little hands, it's easy for them to get really dirty, really fast. But it's dangerous to wash car seat straps.

Washing car seat straps can weaken webbing, allowing them to stretch in an accident. Additionally, detergents or cleaners can strip car seat straps of potentially life saving flame retardant.

What You Can Do to Fix It: Do not remove and wash straps in your washer or submerge them in water or cleaner of any kind. Instead, clean straps with a damp cloth. It may be best to regularly wipe down

straps as accidents happen using baby wipes that you can keep in the car. This way, you'll avoid letting grime build up.

For more information about safe car seat use, visit these online resources:

- [SaferCar.gov](https://www.safercar.gov)
- [SaferCar.gov Car Seat Inspection Station Locator](https://www.safercar.gov/Car-Seat-Inspection-Station-Locator)
- [Safe Kids Worldwide](https://www.safekids.org)
- [Car-Seat.org](https://www.car-seat.org)
- [Car Seats for the Littles](https://www.carseatsforlittles.com)
- [The Car Seat Lady](https://www.thecarseat.com)
- [Safe Ride 4 Kids](https://www.safekids.com)