

# Boosters for Big Kids

## Protecting Preschoolers and Children up to Age 8



Child  
Safety  
Facts  
2009

### 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 age 4, most children are ready to use 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 shoulder belts in the back seat,** see the other side of this sheet.
- Teach your child to buckle up and to pull up on the shoulder belt to make the lap part tight.
- Use the back seat for all children under age 13. The back seat is safer, with or without an air bag.
- The center of the back seat is safest. It is farthest away from any 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 what you do. Make sure **everyone** in the car buckles up.
- Make sure others who drive your child know you expect your child 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 fly around in a sudden stop or crash and injure others in the car.



### Boosters are Much Safer Than Seat Belts Alone

#### When does a child outgrow a car seat?

Your child should use a car seat with a harness for as long as possible. It will give more protection than a booster or a seat belt. Most car seats fit children up to 40 pounds. Some larger car seats fit children up to 65 to 80 pounds.

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

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

**When your child outgrows a car seat,** he or she usually needs a booster seat.

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

A booster seat raises the child up. It helps the lap and shoulder belts fit properly (picture, top). Using a booster seat 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 the window better. See page 2 for tips on choosing and using a booster correctly.

#### A booster is not the best choice if:

- The child is over 40 pounds but 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.
- These children would be much safer riding in a larger car seat or a harness. (See Resources.)

#### Why can't my child use only a seat belt?

Seat belts are made to fit adults. They do not fit most children until at least age 8 to 10. If the lap belt is around or near the child's waist (picture, bottom), it could cause serious injuries in a crash. If the shoulder belt is across the neck, a child might put it behind his back or under his arm. That also could cause very serious injuries.

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

**Use the 5-Step Seat Belt Test\* to find out.** Sit your child in the back seat and put on the seat belt. Check the steps below. If you answer "yes" to **ALL** of these steps, your child is big enough to use a seat belt without a booster.

- Can your child sit with a straight back against the vehicle seat back?
- Do his legs bend comfortably at the edge of the vehicle seat?
- Does the lap belt stay down low on her hips, touching the thighs?
- Is the shoulder belt on the center of the shoulder?
- Can your child sit this way without slouching during a long ride?

Note: Seat belts in other vehicles may not fit the same way.

\* Adapted from SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. 5-Step Test



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



Poor seat belt fit. Child is too small to use it safely.

## Kinds of Booster Seats

Most boosters fit children from 40 to 80 to 100 pounds.

- **Booster with a high back:** Best if your vehicle has a low seatback to help prevent neck injuries. A high back may provide better head protection in side impacts. The high back helps keep a sleeping child in place (picture, right). (Note: A few cannot be used with low-back vehicle seats.)



High-back, belt-positioning booster

- **Combination seat:** This kind of car seat has a harness for a child under 40 to 80 pounds. The harness can be taken out to make it into a high-back booster for a larger child.

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

## Choosing and Using a Booster Correctly

**Proper fit of the seat belt is important.** All boosters designed for use in a car are safe. Choose a booster that makes the seat belt fit your child correctly.

A lap-shoulder belt **MUST** be used to hold your child in a booster. **NEVER** use a lap belt only. A few also use the LATCH anchors. **ALWAYS** follow the instructions.

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 your child. Use the seat belt guides on the booster.
- Check the lap belt position. It should be on top of the thighs or low on the hips.
- Check the shoulder belt position. It should go across the middle of the shoulder. Most shoulder belt guides on boosters are adjustable to help with proper fit. Make sure the belt slides through the guide easily.

### Air Bag Warning

In a crash, the impact of the air bag can injure or kill children. Never put a rear-facing car seat in front of an active air bag.

If you cannot avoid putting a forward-facing child in front, make sure the car seat harness or the shoulder belt is snug. Move the vehicle seat all the way back.

A sports car or pickup truck with no back seat or a very small back seat may have a switch or sensor that turns the front air bag off. Make sure the air bag is turned off before putting a child in front. (Turn it on again for adult passengers.)

Side air bags in the back seat: Make sure your child does not lean against the side of the car.

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

## If a Car Has Only Lap Belts in Back

A booster seat cannot be used with a lap belt, so a different safety device is needed. Also, some children over 40 pounds need more support than a booster gives.

Options are:

- A car seat with a harness for a child over 40 pounds (picture, right).
- Vests and harnesses for children over 40 pounds, which require a tether strap.



Car seat for child over 40 pounds, used with seat belt and tether

## Using Seat Belts correctly

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

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

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

**If there is a shoulder belt,** make sure your child uses it. The shoulder belt should cross the middle of the shoulder.

Make sure your child does **not** put the shoulder belt behind her back or under her arm. That can cause very 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 a shoulder belt adjuster bought from a store. They do not have to meet safety standards. They may make the seat belt too loose or the lap belt too high. This can cause serious injury.



Correct seat belt fit

## Resources

- NHTSA Auto Safety Hotline: 888-327-4236, 800-424-9153 (tty), [www.safercar.gov](http://www.safercar.gov)
- SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.: 800-745-7233, [www.carseat.org](http://www.carseat.org)
- To find a local car seat inspection station: 866-732-8243, [www.seatcheck.org](http://www.seatcheck.org)
- Car seats for children over 40 pounds: [www.saferidenews.com](http://www.saferidenews.com)
- The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia: [www.chop.edu/carseat](http://www.chop.edu/carseat)