

Choosing a Car for Family Safety

Features to look for when shopping

Think Safety Before Buying A New or Used Car

Some cars (including pickup trucks, vans, and SUVs) have features that make it easier to keep your children safe (see picture below). Take the time to check out the car before you buy it. Keep safety in mind.

Learning About Cars

You can find plenty of safety information on new and used cars (see Resources, p. 2).

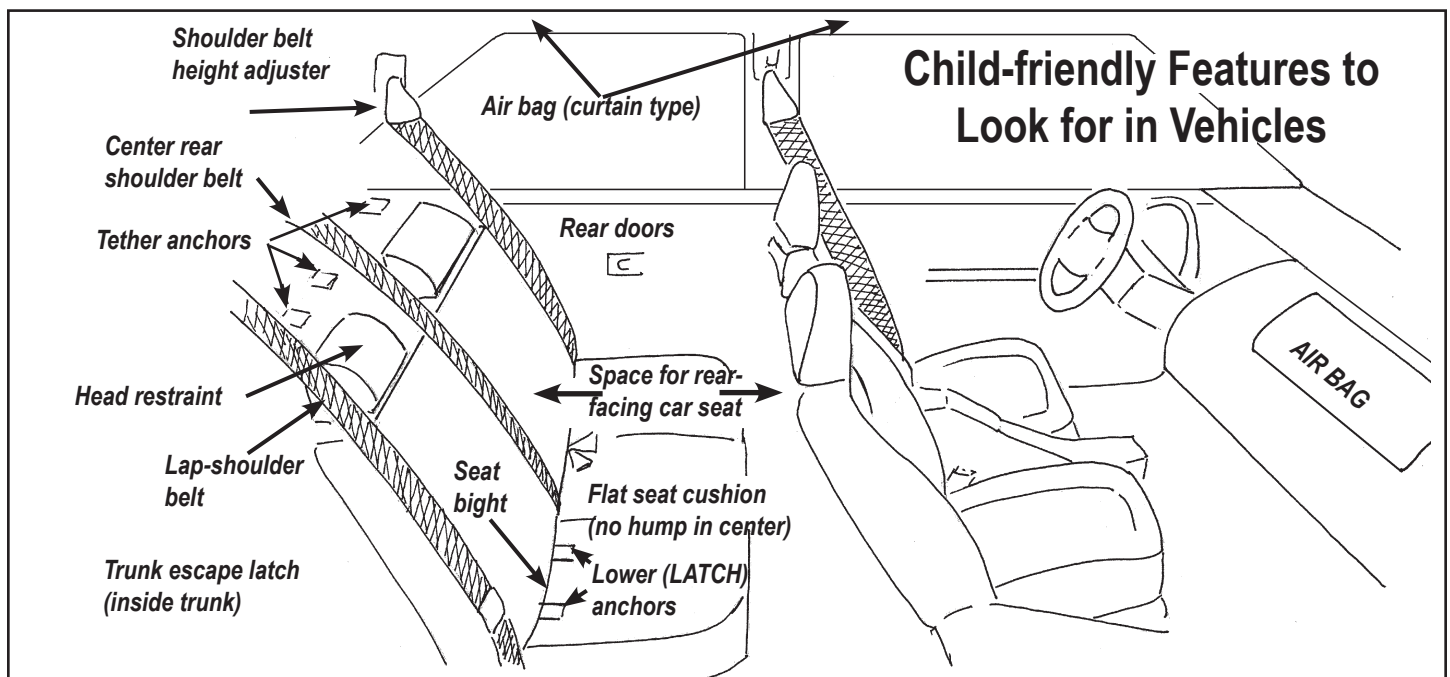
Before buying a car, ask to see the vehicle owner's manual. Look up "safety" and "child restraints." Newer car manuals have more details about safety features than manuals for older cars. If a used car doesn't have a manual, ask the dealer to order one.

Basics for Choosing a Safer Family Car

- ✓ **A big car** is generally safer than a small car. However, smaller, newer cars often have better safety features than older, larger ones.
- ✓ **Space and easy access for children's car seats.** Make sure there is enough room in the back seat to install them correctly. Look for a flat back seat and three seat belts. A car with four doors allows easier access to the back seat.
- ✓ **Enough seating positions in the back seat** for all children you plan to take in the car. Sitting in the back seat cuts the chance of serious injury to children by 43 percent. Put all children under 13 in back, if possible.
- ✓ **Seat belt features that work best for children:**
 - lap belts attached where the cushions meet (seat bight).
 - shoulder belts in all positions—needed for kids using boosters.
 - shoulder belts with height adjusters.
 - belts that lock tightly around a car seat (since 1996).
- ✓ **Head restraints for all passengers.**
- ✓ **Know if the car has air bags** (see page 2). A front passenger air bag can kill a baby riding rear facing in the front seat. It also can kill or seriously injure a child riding unbuckled or leaning forward. **NEVER** put a baby in front with an air bag that has not been turned off.
- ✓ **Small pickup trucks and sports cars are not for families.** If a truck or sports car has no back seat or one too small for a rear-facing car seat, your child may have to ride in front. In that case, make sure there is a switch or sensor to turn off the front air bag. **ALWAYS** be sure to turn the air bag off when a baby or child rides in front.



Use the car owner's manual to find out more about installing a car seat.



▲ **Air bags** help protect adults, but, in a crash, a front passenger air bag (picture below) can kill a baby in a rear-facing car seat. Put babies in back!

Cars made since 1998–99 have front air bags. Many earlier cars also have them. Look for the label “AIR BAG” or letters “SRS” or “SIR” on the right side of the dashboard. There also are warning labels on the sun visor or doorframe.

Advanced air bags in newer cars help protect front seat passengers. **But**, children are still much safer in back.



Small trucks and sports cars with air bags do not have space in the back seat for a rear-facing car seat. Only buy this kind of vehicle if it has an air bag on/off switch or a sensor that turns the passenger air bag off. Make sure the air bag is **off** if a child is riding in the front seat. Make sure it is turned **on** for adults.

▲ **Side-impact air bags** are in the backseat of many newer cars. (Read the owner’s manual.) Some cover side windows (called “curtains”). Others come out below the windows. Side air bags help protect children properly buckled into car seats.

It is best to keep children from leaning against the side of the car. A booster with a high back can help keep a child in place while sleeping. Many

newer cars have been tested to make sure their side air bags will not harm out-of-position children.

▲ **Plenty of space (front to back) in the rear seat** is needed for larger rear-facing car seats.

▲ **A flat bench seat is best** if you want to place your child in the center (the safest position) or need to put three children in back. It is hard to install a car seat in the center if the vehicle seat has a hump or hollow. If you will have three children in back, check for fit side to side.

IMPORTANT! Car seats can only be put in forward-facing vehicle seats. Side-facing seats are dangerous for car seats and older children.

▲ **LATCH (Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children)**, also called ISOFIX or Universal Anchorages, is a way to install a car seat without a seat belt. (See the car owner’s manual.)

Lower anchors are in all cars since 2004 and in most 2003 models. Some older models have them. Small symbols (right) or “Isofix” tags mark hidden anchors.



Lower anchors are usually in two side seats in back. Some cars have them in the center position (see owner’s manual). If lower anchors cannot be used in the center, use the seat belt instead. LATCH is convenient, not safer.

Tether anchors add safety to any forward-facing car seat. **Use them!** Starting with the 2000 models, most cars have at least three tether anchors installed. They are often marked with a symbol (right). Many older cars can have tether anchors added. Check car owner’s manual or ask a dealer.



▲ **Seat belts attached where the**

cushions meet can hold a car seat securely in place. Avoid belts attached more than one inch forward of the seat back. Look for belts that are equally spaced across the vehicle seat.

▲ **Center-rear shoulder belts** are safer than lap-only belts. They are needed for children using boosters and for older children.

▲ **Shoulder belt height adjusters** in the car help shoulder belts fit better.

▲ **Head restraints for everyone** in the car are important. They protect the head and neck in a crash. If a head rest tilts forward, a tall forward-facing car seat may not fit well. Look for head rests that can be removed or adjusted.

▲ **Safe window switches** only raise the windows when the switches are pulled up. This can prevent a child from getting caught. Windows that stop when something is in the way are best.

▲ **Built-in, forward-facing child seats** are options in some cars and vans. They need no installation.

▲ **Try your car seat(s) in the car before you buy.** If possible, take your car seats with you when shopping for a car.

Resources

NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration): Air bag on/off switch information, *Buying a Safer Car* booklet, side air bag information, vehicle lists; 888-327-4236 or 800-424-9153 (tty), www.safercar.gov

Shopping for a Safer Car, booklet, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety: 703-247-1536, www.iihs.org

Buying guides for new and used cars, trucks, SUVs: books by Consumers Union, Jack Gillis, Consumer Guide

SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A., national advocacy group: technical assistance with using car seats; 800-745-7233, www.carseat.org

Locate a car seat inspection station or technician: 866-866-732-8243, www.seatcheck.org

Kids and Cars: www.kidsandcars.org