



Child Passenger Safety: Protecting Children and Reducing Liability in Child Care

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While properly used car safety seats and seat belts save lives, motor vehicle crashes remain the primary killer of young children and their families. Consider these facts:

- About four out of five car safety seats on the road today are used incorrectly in one or more ways, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).
- Of the 600 children under age 5 who die each year in crashes, 50% weren't restrained at all, and 26% were using adult safety belts.
- When used correctly, car safety seats are 71% effective in reducing fatalities among children under age 5.
- Children are 30% more likely to survive a car crash when they are sitting in the back seat rather than the front.
- When a driver is unbuckled, 70% of the time the children in that vehicle are unrestrained also.

Among the many important decisions made by child care profession-

als is the decision about whether to transport a child. Decisions to transport children should be made thoughtfully. The responsible child care provider considers parent wishes; legal, regulatory, moral, and ethical issues; and the best interests of the child. Reasons for transporting children include enhancing the educational/developmental experience through field trips, providing a service to parents and guardians, and caring for children in emergency situations. Once child care providers learn about safe transportation, they can reduce their liability and teach parents and children about traffic safety issues.

Remember that transportation guidelines are not an exclusive approach or an absolute measure of security. When you care for children with special needs, consult a pediatrician regarding the application of these guidelines to these individual children. You can also call the DOT Auto Safety Hotline, operated by the Department of Transportation, at (800) 424-9393 for more information.

Driver criteria. Select drivers carefully. Anyone who transports children for a child care program should have a valid driver's license,

possess extensive driving experience, display a high level of maturity and caution, have an excellent driving record, and have no record of substance abuse. If the driver is a paid staff member or contracted service provider, obtain a criminal background check. If the driver is a parent and/or a volunteer, the child care facility should obtain and file the driver's license number, vehicle insurance information, and verification of current state vehicle inspection.

Ratios. Meet or exceed child:staff ratios set by state regulations for the care of children at the child care facility and use, meet, or exceed these ratios when transporting children to or from the facility, too. Keep in mind that regulations set a **minimum standard**. Drivers must be able to focus entirely on driving tasks, leaving supervisory roles to other adults in the vehicle.

Supervision. The staff of the child care program are responsible for directly supervising every child. When parent volunteers participate in transportation, require that they supervise the children in a manner consistent with the program's policy for the age and maturity of the individuals in the group. Be sure

that the volunteers accompany children into the building after each trip, and stay with them until they transfer that responsibility to another child care provider.

Loading zone plan. Carefully assess all pick-up and drop-off locations. Each child care center or home is unique in the way that it is positioned in proximity to local traffic, parking lots, and pedestrian areas. Injuries and fatalities can occur during the loading and unloading process, especially in situations where vans or school buses are used to transport children.

Child care providers should increase adult supervision when children are getting in and out of vehicles, especially in the area immediately around the vehicle. In this “danger zone” around the vehicle, the driver cannot see small children or objects easily. The person in charge of the child care facility must be sure that plans for loading and unloading have been discussed with the children, child care providers, and drivers before each trip. Ask the traffic safety officer from your local police department to assist you with making these plans.

Educating children, drivers, and staff about transportation safety.

Drivers and staff should be provided with information on emergency plans, pre-trip vehicle and child safety seat inspections, supervision requirements, general child passenger safety precautions, and the proper use of vehicle restraints (car safety seats and seat belts). Child care providers and other staff, and parents, should serve as role models by properly using seat belts and properly restrain passengers in their own cars. Certified child passenger safety technicians work in every state. Contact the DOT Auto Safety

Hotline — (800) 424-9393 — to see who is available in your location to help you.

Children need transportation safety information, too. Use a variety of methods to help children learn about transportation safety: puppet shows, videos, stories, art activities, dramatic play, and speakers. Child care providers should consider working with local law enforcement officers as educators. They can heighten awareness about this issue by providing educational sessions for parents, caregivers, and children, and by conducting parking lot safety checks where children and parents who are properly restrained receive stickers, colorful handouts, or other incentives.

The proper use of car safety seats and vehicle restraints. Properly used car safety seats are very effective in reducing death and injury. The best car safety seat is one that fits in the vehicle being used, fits the child being transported, has never been in a crash, and is used correctly every time. To provide maximum protection for each child during transport, each child should be in an age-appropriate restraint that is properly positioned and installed. The American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Injury and Poison Prevention recommends:

■ Children should face the rear of the vehicle until they are at least 20 pounds AND 1 year of age. Infants who weigh 20 pounds before age 1 should ride facing the rear in a convertible seat or infant seat approved for higher weights until 1 year of age.

■ A rear-facing car safety seat must NEVER be placed in the front passenger seat of any vehicle equipped with a passenger air bag.

■ Premature and small infants should not ride in car safety seats with shields, abdominal pads, or arm rests that could come into direct contact with the infant’s face and neck during a collision.

■ In rear-facing car safety seats for infants, shoulder straps must be **at or below** the child’s shoulders. The harness must be snug, and the car safety seat retainer clip should be positioned at the midpoint of the infant’s chest, not at the abdomen or the neck.

■ If the vehicle seat slopes so that the infant’s head flops forward, the child safety seat should be reclined to a 45-degree tilt. A firm roll of cloth or newspaper can be wedged under the car safety seat below the infant’s feet to achieve this angle.

■ A convertible car safety seat, in a reclining and rear-facing position for a child less than 1 year of age and less than 20 pounds, and upright and forward-facing for a child older than 1 year of age who weighs 20-40 pounds, should be used as long as the child fits well. (Ears should be below the top of the back of the seat and shoulders should be below the seat strap slots.) Unlike the strap position in infant seats, for older children be sure to position the harness straps **at or above** the shoulders.

■ A belt-positioning booster seat should be used when the child has outgrown a convertible safety seat, but is too small to fit properly in a vehicle safety belt. (Children should be in booster seats until they weigh 60-80 pounds.) When the vehicle safety belt fits properly, the lap belt lies low and tight across the child’s hips (not the abdomen) and the shoulder belt lies flat across the shoulder, away from the neck and face — usually when the child reaches 80 pounds and 5 feet in height.

■ There are two types of booster seats. When a combination lap/shoulder belt is available, a booster seat that can be used with this type of belt is preferable to a booster seat with a small shield, which can be used when only a lap belt is available. **A booster seat with a small shield can only be used for a child who weighs less than 40 pounds.** Children under 40 pounds are better protected in a full convertible seat than in a booster seat with a small shield.

■ Many new vehicles are equipped with integrated car safety seats designed for children who weigh at least 20 pounds and are at least 1 year of age. All infants younger than 1 year of age should be positioned facing the rear in separate car safety seats.

■ Parents and others who transport young children should be aware that incompatibility problems between the design of the car safety seat, vehicle seat, and the seat belt system can be life-threatening and can be avoided by:

■ Reading the vehicle owner's manual and car safety seat device instructions carefully;

■ Testing the car safety seat for a safe, snug fit in the vehicle; and

■ Remembering that the rear vehicle seat is the safest place for a child of any age to ride.

Written policies. Clearly written transportation policies should be provided to and discussed with drivers, child care providers, and parents. Child care providers can draw on past experiences and document the most effective way to handle transportation situations. Transportation policies help clarify expectations for drivers regarding supervision and other responsibilities, personal errands during "driving time," non-smoking policies, traffic violations and crashes, and what the driver should do if no one is present to meet the vehicle at

the end of the trip. Also, contingency plans should be in place for times when volunteer drivers cancel at the last minute or become ill or disabled on an outing.

You can get a head start on drafting a written policy by filling in the blanks in the transportation section of the *Model Child Care Health Policies* (available on the ECELS page of the web site of the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, <www.paaap.org>).

By following the guidelines and suggestions outlined in this article, child care providers and parents can work together to ensure the safety of the children in their care and reduce the incidence of injuries and fatalities during times when children are being transported.

This information was adapted from an article that appeared in the May 1998 issue of the *Healthy Child Care America* newsletter, a publication of the Healthy Child Care America campaign. The campaign is a collaborative effort of health professionals, child care providers, and parents working in partnership to promote the optimal health and safety of children in child care settings. The child passenger safety component of the campaign is sponsored by the US Department of Health and Human Services Child Care Bureau and Maternal and Child Health Bureau and the Department of Transportation National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and is coordinated in partnership with the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Through this effort, the "Operation Kids" curriculum on child passenger safety has been modified for the child care provider audience and 1½ day educational training sessions for child care providers will be offered in select locations across the country. For more information, contact the Academy at (888) 227-5409 or send an e-mail message to childcare@aap.org. You can also look on the NHTSA web page: <www.nhtsa.dot.gov>.

Other Resources

Model Child Care Health Policies, a booklet produced by the Healthy Child Care Pennsylvania, contains generic policies on a variety of issues including transportation and field trips. This publication is available for purchase through the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Department of Marketing and Publications at (800) 433-9016 and the National Association for the Education of Young Children at (800) 424-2460. An electronic copy of the text is posted on the Early Childhood Education Linkage System (ECELS) page of the Pennsylvania chapter of the AAP web site, <www.paaap.org>.

Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-Home Child Care Programs includes guidelines related to child passenger safety and is available by contacting the AAP Department of Marketing and Publications at (800) 433-9016. The full text of the *Caring for Our Children* and other standards and summaries of individual states' licensure regulations can be found on the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care's web site, <<http://nrc.uchsc.edu>>.

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