

## **Car Seat and Air Bag Safety**

*The University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development*

Carla was loading groceries into the back of her mini-van when the teenage grocery clerk collecting shopping carts approached. “Shouldn’t babies be in the back seat?” he said.

He was referring to Carla’s 10-month-old son who was in an infant car seat that was strapped in the front passenger seat of the van, facing forward. “I’m not going far,” Carla said curtly enough to stifle any response from the teenager.

Having a teenager question her judgment stung. But the young man was correct.

Infants and children should never ride in the front seat of a vehicle with an air bag. Air bags are effective safety devices, but they inflate with explosive force – enough to seriously injure or even kill a child within range.

The safest place to ride for all infants and children under 12 years of age is in the back seat, especially if the vehicle is equipped with front air bags.

Infants should always ride in a rear-facing car seat in the back seat of the vehicle until they are at least one year old and weigh at least 20 pounds. Then, the child should still ride in the back seat, but in a car seat that faces forward. No matter how short the ride.

About 70% of people who install a child car seat do it incorrectly. So, carefully read and follow the manufacturer’s instructions. And check for recalled seats. The U.S. Department of Transportation Auto Safety Hotline (888-DASH-2-DOT) offers free product recall and car seat information.

Before traveling, always do a safety check. Make sure your child is facing the right way for his or her weight and age. Make sure the auto seat belt securing the car seat is in the correct position (mid-chest level) and that it is pulled tight so you can get only two fingers under the belt. Be sure the car seat harness is snug and that it stays on your child’s shoulders.

Seat belts do not always fit older children properly, and a poorly-fitting shoulder or lap harness can cause injury. A booster seat should be used when a child outgrows a convertible safety seat but is too small for the auto seat belt to fit properly. Some states require special seats for older children.

After the teenage grocery clerk returned to the store, Carla’s pride recovered and she moved her son’s car seat from the front to the back seat of the mini-van. She felt better knowing he was safer for it.

*This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.*