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Car seat safety: Are Australian children safe?

Car seat confusion putting Aussie kids at risk of injury and death, poll finds

Many Australian children are not travelling in the safest restraint or position of the car. While the majority of parents are complying with the law, the legislation does not reflect expert recommendations for safest car seat choices, meaning parents are unknowingly putting their children at a significantly increased risk of serious injury or death in the event of a crash.

Based on current Australian laws, children can legally travel in an adult seat belt without a booster seat from age seven years. But National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) approved guidelines recommend children remain in a booster seat until they are at least 145 cm tall, which for most children is around 11 years of age.

The Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) National Child Health Poll found two thirds of children (63%) aged seven to 10 years travel in an adult seatbelt without a booster seat, even though the majority of these children are below the recommended height to safely use an adult seatbelt. Almost half of children (47%) aged between seven and 12 years travel in the front seat of the car, doubling their risk of being injured in a crash.

Children between six months and two years of age are being put at risk too, with more than half (53%) of polled parents turning their children to travel forward-facing earlier than the recommended two years of age.

The nation-wide poll of 1639 parents caring for 2778 children aged from one month to 13 years found:

- The most common age for first travelling without a booster seat is seven years (35%) followed by eight years (28%)

- The leading reason for having children under 12 travel in the front seat is that their parents believed they were old enough to safely do so (39%)

Parents who transitioned their children (aged seven to 12) out of booster seats into an adult seatbelt said:

- By law they were old enough to sit without a booster seat (42%)

- Their child was tall enough to safely sit without a booster seat (42%).

- Their child was too grown up for a booster seat (17%)

- Their child did not want to sit in a booster seat (14%)

Most parents (71%) indicated they did not know how tall a child should be to safely use an adult seatbelt and among the 29% who reported knowing, only 11% got it right – meaning fewer than 3% of parents know that children should be at least 145 cm tall to safely travel in an adult seatbelt without a booster seat. Only one in 10 (11%) children were 10 years or older when first travelling in the family car without a booster seat, suggesting the vast majority are transitioning out of the booster seat much earlier than recommended as safest practice.

RCH National Child Health Poll Director Dr Anthea Rhodes said "Children aged seven to 12 years old are being left vulnerable to life-threatening injuries from car crashes due to inadequate use of car restraints and travelling in the front seat of the car."

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"It's critical to measure your child before transitioning them out of a booster seat into an adult seatbelt. Booster seats protect children less than 145 cm in height by lifting them up so that the seatbelt fits better cross the chest and hips. Most children don't reach 145 cm tall until around 11 years of age," Dr Rhodes said.

"This study shows that parents are unaware of best practice recommendations when it comes to car seats and kids. Parents are following the law but unfortunately the law does not reflect safest practice and this means many parents are unknowingly putting their children at risk of serious injury or death every day. A review of Australian laws relating to child car restraints and front seat travel is warranted to address this situation in which current laws may permit, or even encourage unsafe practices," Dr Rhodes said.