



Children and car seats: Are we doing enough?

Poll report

Poll 36, April 2025



Report highlights

- Despite complying with the law, many children are not travelling in the car seats recommended to keep them as safe as possible.
- It is safest practice for a child to travel in a **rearward** facing restraint from birth, as long as they still fit. Over half of children (55%) first ride in a **forward** facing car restraint before 18 months.
- One in three children (34%) move out of a booster seat for reasons that do not align with safest practice, with most first travelling with an adult seat belt alone before they are ten years old.

Background

There is legislation in all states and territories about which car restraints children should use with different laws for children of different ages.¹ There are also nationally endorsed recommendations about evidence-based best practice for the safest restraint of children based on their size and how they fit in various restraints.² These safest practice recommendations differ from legislation with the mismatch more evident at some ages than others. For example, the law stipulates that children from birth to six months must be restrained in a rearward facing restraint, however, safest practice is that children should use a rearward facing restraint until they outgrow it.^{1,2} There are restraints on the market to allow children to travel rearward facing until two to three years of age. Shoulder height markers should be used to determine whether a child still fits in a restraint.

From age seven onwards it is legal for children to travel in an adult lap-sash seat belt ('adult seat belt') without a booster seat, despite the safest practice recommendation being that children remain in a booster seat until they are big enough to obtain good seat belt fit as assessed by the '5 step test'. Children must meet all five parts of the '5 step test' to pass and are not expected to be big enough to pass until they reach 10 to 12 years of age.²

Are children travelling in car restraints in keeping with the law?

Which car restraints are children using and at what age?

Parents were asked what type of car seat their child used *most often* when travelling in the family car (Figure 1).

Children aged 0 to less than two years

All children aged under six months are reportedly restrained in a rearward facing car restraint, in accordance with the legislation. Among all children aged six months to less than two years, two thirds (64%) are in a rearward facing restraint, one third (30%) are in a forward facing restraint and 6% are in a booster seat. Booster seats are not legal for children until four years of age.

Children aged two to three years

Almost all children aged two to three years (89%) are restrained in a rearward or forward facing restraint. One in ten (11%) are reportedly in a booster seat, which is not legal practice until four years of age.

Children aged four to six years

The vast majority of children aged four to six years are restrained in a rearward or forward facing restraint (50%) or a booster seat (40%). Booster cushions, as distinct from booster seats, are not recommended and can no longer be legally sold in Australia. One in ten children are not travelling in a legal restraint, with 7% using a booster cushion and 3% using an adult seat belt only.

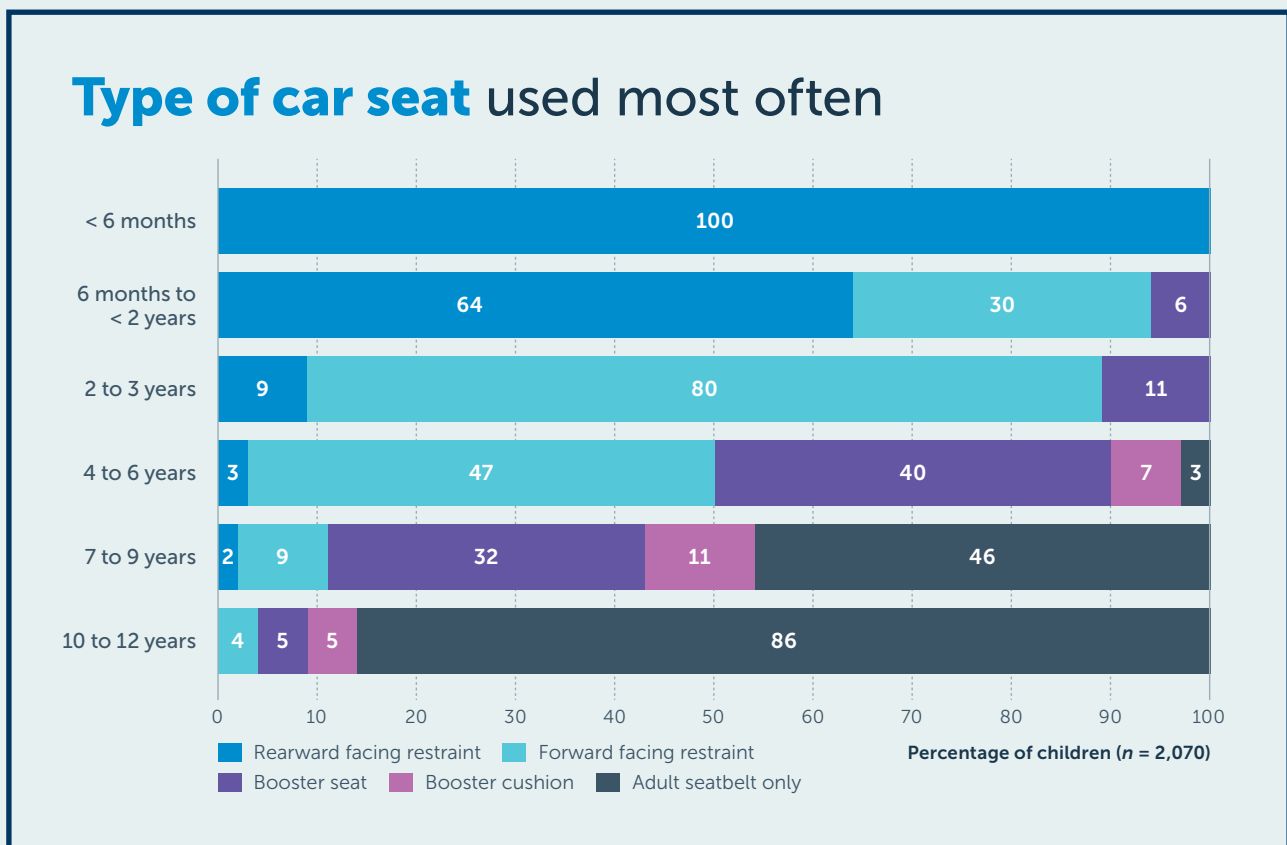


Figure 1.

Children aged seven to nine years

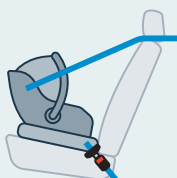
Around half of children aged seven to nine years (46%) are using an adult seatbelt only with one in ten using a booster cushion (11%). Less than half are restrained in a forward or rearward facing restraint (11%) or on a booster seat (32%).

Children aged 10 to 12 years

The majority of children (86%) are using an adult seat belt only, with the remainder using either a forward facing restraint (4%), an adult seat belt with a booster seat (5%) or an adult seat belt with a booster cushion (5%).

Are children using the car seats recommended to keep them as safe as possible?

Types of car restraints



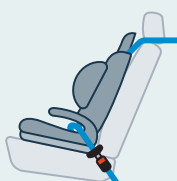
Rearward facing restraints

Children, from birth, should use rearward facing child restraints for as long as they fit within them. Restraints designed for rearward facing use are available for children up to two to three years of age.



Forward facing restraints

Once a child is too big for their rearward facing child restraint, they should use a forward facing child restraint with an inbuilt harness as long as they still fit within it. By law children must remain in a car restraint with a harness until they are four years old. Restraints are available for forward facing use with an inbuilt harness for children up to eight years of age.



Booster seats

Once a child has outgrown their forward facing restraint, they should use a booster seat until they can no longer fit within it or can achieve good seat belt fit as assessed by the '5 step test'. Most children up to 10 to 12 years of age require a booster seat to obtain good adult seat belt fit.



Booster cushions

Booster cushions do not have a head or back support and cannot be anchored to the car. Booster cushions, as distinct from booster seats, are not recommended and can no longer be legally sold in Australia.

References: (1) Neuroscience Research Australia and Kidsafe Australia: *Best Practice Guidelines for the Safe Restraint of Children Travelling in Motor Vehicles, 2nd Edition*. Sydney: 2020. (2) Victorian Department of Transport <https://transport.vic.gov.au/road-rules-and-safety/child-car-seats-and-restraints/types-of-child-car-seats-and-restraints>. Accessed March 2025

While most parents comply with the law, many parents report practices that do not align with expert recommendations for safest car seat choices regarding type and positioning for children.² The largest difference between the type and orientation of restraints used by children and those recommended by experts was observed for children aged zero to less than two years and those aged seven to nine years.

Among children under two years of age, approximately one in five (17%) were not restrained according to safest practice most of the time when travelling in the family car, as they were in a forward facing restraint and reportedly had not outgrown their rearward facing restraint. Four in five (83%) were restrained according to safest practice, either in a rearward facing restraint or a

forward facing restraint after outgrowing the rearward facing restraint or exceeding its weight limit, according to parent report.

Among children aged seven to nine years, approximately one in three (29%) were not restrained according to safest practice and were either using an adult seat belt only or a booster cushion (as distinct from a booster seat) most of the time when travelling in the family car. Seven in ten (71%) were restrained in accordance with safest practice. These children were either using a forward or rearward facing restraint (15%), a booster seat (45%) or an adult seat belt only (40%) because they had either outgrown their booster or car seat and/or passed the '5 step test' according to parent report.

Age children first moved from rearward facing to forward facing restraint

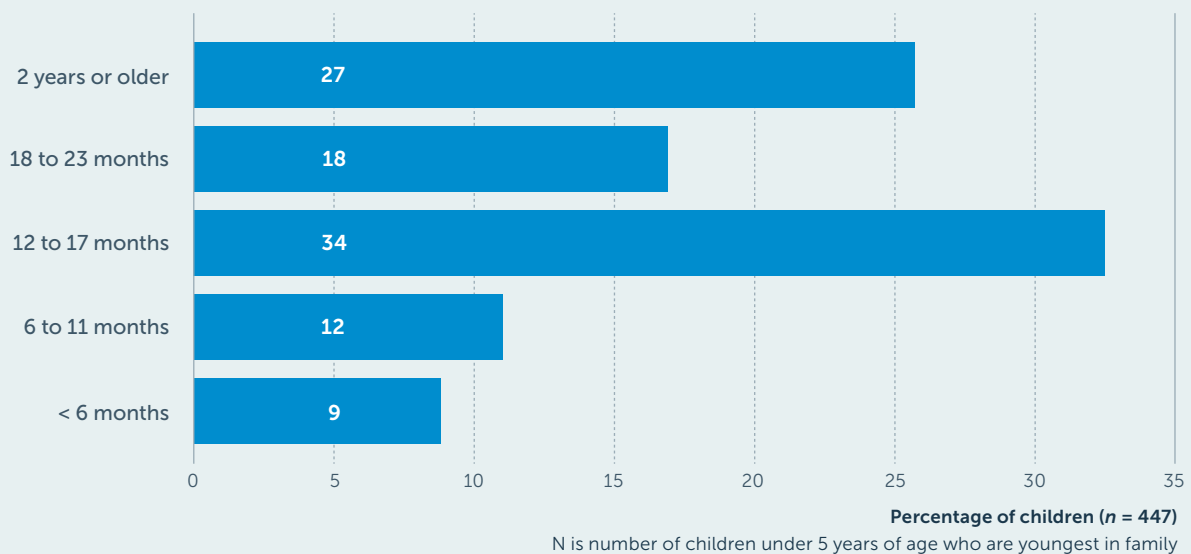


Figure 2.

Babies and toddlers moving from rearward to forward facing restraints

When

From six months of age, by law, children can transition to forward facing seats, yet the safest practice recommendation is for children to remain rearward facing as long as possible, provided they still fit.²

Parents reported on past behaviour by stating at what age their youngest child aged under five years was first turned to be forward facing instead of rearward facing some of the time (*Figure 2*). From six months there was a sharp increase in children facing forward. By 12 months of age, one in five children (21%) were forward facing some of the time, with this rising to half of children (55%) by 18 months of age. Almost all of these children would typically fit in rearward facing restraints as many seats available for purchase in Australia are designed for use by children up to two to three years of age.

Why

Parents of children aged under five years were asked the main three reasons why they decided to move their child to a forward facing seat.

Overall, less than half of children (44%) of children aged under five years were moved for one or more recommended reasons and over half (56%) moved for reasons other than those recommended.

In accordance with safest practice, one third of parents (34%) moved their child because they outgrew the seat and 18% said their child exceeded the seat weight limit. Other parents cited reasons that do not align with recommendations such as 'child is more comfortable facing forward' (40%), 'child likes to see where they are going' (28%) and 'child over the age limit for seat' (25%).

Children moving from booster seats to adult seat belt only

When

From the age of seven years children can legally transition out of car seats and booster seats into using adult seat belts only, however this is not the recommended safest practice. Parents of children up to 12 years of age were asked when their child first moved from a restraint or booster to an adult seat belt alone. Before the age of seven years, 17% of children were restrained by an adult seat belt alone some of the time. Three in four children (74%) were first in an adult seat belt before the age of nine years and seven in eight children (87%) before the age of 10 years.

Reasons why children moved from booster seat to adult seat belt only

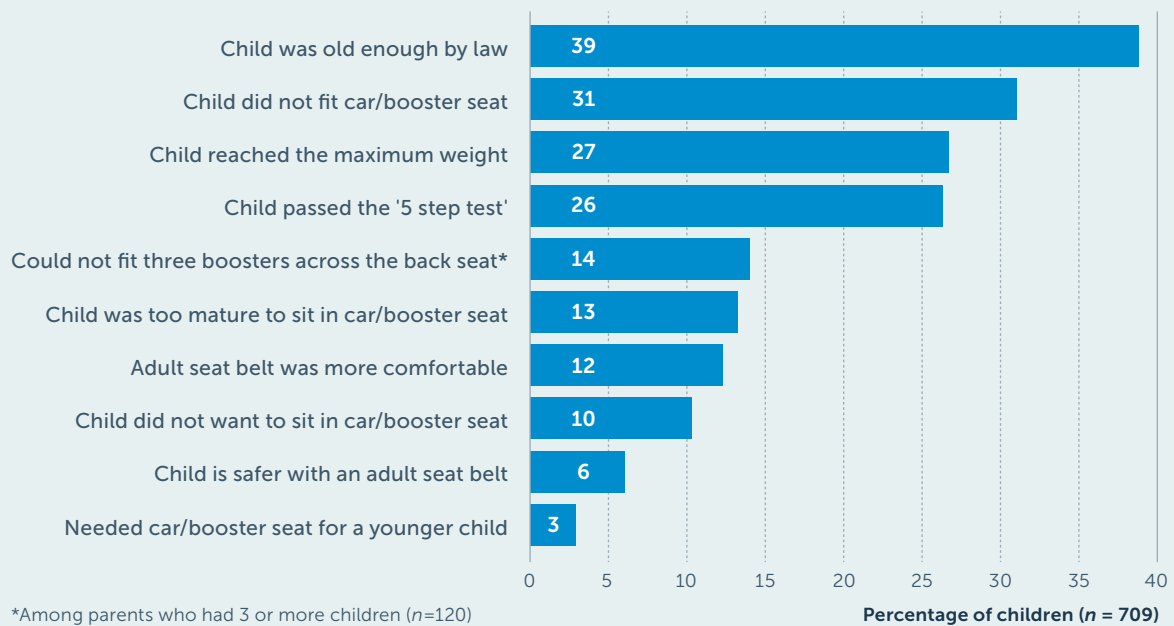


Figure 3.

Why

Safest practice recommendations are for children to move to an adult seat belt only when they can achieve good belt fit according to the '5 step test' or have outgrown their booster seat. Children who would fit into a booster seat but travel without one, and have poor seat belt fit, are at significant increased risk of serious injury in the event of a crash.³ Parents of children aged up to 12 years who were restrained by an adult seat belt only were asked the main reasons why they transitioned their child from a booster seat (Figure 3). In accordance with safest practice, two in three children (66%) were moved for one or more recommended reasons, and one third (34%) were moved for one or more reasons inconsistent with recommendations.

Children were reportedly moved out of a booster because they 'passed the 5 step test' (26%) or 'did not fit in their car seat or booster seat' (31%) or 'reached the maximum weight recommended by seat manufacturer' (27%). Reasons for moving which did not align with recommendations included 'by law child was old enough' (39%), 'child was too mature to sit in car seat or booster' (13%), 'adult seat belt was more comfortable for them' (12%) and 'child did not want to sit in booster' (10%).

One in five (21%) children aged seven to nine years were moved out of a booster seat into an adult seat belt only not because of the reasons described in the safest practice recommendations (outgrowing their booster or passing '5 step test') but because they were legally old enough.

5 Step Test

The '5 step test' helps determine if a child is big enough to safely move to an adult seat belt. A child can safely travel with an adult seat belt alone if they can do all of the following:

1. Sit with their backs firmly against the seat back
2. Bend their knees comfortably over the front of the seat cushion
3. Sit with the sash belt across their mid-shoulder
4. Sit with the lap belt across the top of their thighs
5. Stay in this position for the whole car trip



Are parents aware of safest-practice recommendations about when to transition from a booster to an adult seat belt only?

The '5 step test' is central to expert recommendations about when children can be safely restrained by an adult seat belt alone, i.e. without a booster seat.² However, only one in five parents (21%) of children aged zero to 12 years report having heard of the '5 step test'. Among these, 67% correctly identified what the test was used for. Overall, just under one in seven (14%) of all parents had heard of the '5 step test' and know its purpose. When age of children was considered, this proportion ranged from just 10% of parents of four to six years olds to 22% of parents of children aged seven years and over. We did not ask parents if they knew what the test was comprised of, that is, the five steps of the test.

Parents were asked if they knew from what age children in general are likely to be old enough to be safely restrained by an adult seat belt alone. Only one in ten (11%) knew and correctly reported ten years or more. The majority said they did not know (38%) or incorrectly reported age eight or nine years (25%), or seven years and under (26%).

These findings suggest parents have very low levels of knowledge of safest-practice recommendations for safely transitioning out of a booster seat into an adult seat belt only.

Many children are not travelling in the car seats that are recommended to keep them as safe as possible.



Implications

In Australia, road traffic crashes are the leading cause of death and serious injury among children aged less than 15 years.⁴ Many road traffic crashes and the injuries they cause are preventable. Appropriately fitted and used child car seats are the single most important 'in-vehicle' safety feature to protect a child from death and serious injury.

Current Australian laws regarding car seat use do not align with expert opinion and evidence-based best practices for safety.^{1,2} The findings of this study demonstrate low levels of compliance with safest practice recommendations for children aged under two years and those aged seven to under 10 years likely because that is where recommendations differ greatly from current laws. We have shown that many Australian children are not travelling in the safest restraint, primarily because parents are unlikely to be aware of the safest practice recommendations.

Infants from six months can legally transition from a rearward facing restraint with an in-built harness to a forward facing restraint with an in-built harness under current laws. This is despite safest practice saying that children should be rearward facing for as long as they fit and restraints being available for children up to two to three years.² Younger children may not have the neck or torso strength to support their body in the event of a crash and a rear facing restraint will likely reduce the risk of injury when children can be safely transitioned out of a booster seat into an adult seat belt alone. This is likely because they are unaware of safest practice recommendations and believe that legislation reflects safest practice.

Many Australian children aged seven to under 10 years of age are vulnerable to life-threatening injuries from car crashes due to inadequate use of booster seats. Booster seats save lives and mitigate the risk of serious injuries to children too small for adult seat belts only. Children under 10 to 12 years of age are likely to have poor lap belt fit, increasing the risk of abdominal and lower spinal injuries; and poor sash belt fit, increasing the risk of head, neck and upper spinal injuries.³ Booster seats improve safety as they maintain a good dynamic seat belt position during a crash, so that the seat belt can operate as designed.³

Parents report moving children to adult seat belts too early, with more than 80 percent in an adult seat belt only before 10 years of age for reasons other than those recommended. Many parents are basing their decision on legal requirements rather than safest practice despite booster seats saving lives and preventing serious injuries. The vast majority of parents are not aware of the '5 step test' or what it is used for, despite it being central to recommendations about remaining in a booster. Education campaigns about safest practice are urgently needed to extend booster seat use by older children across the Australian population and reduce the risk of serious injuries arising from traffic crashes. Special efforts should be made to focus on those groups who may have particularly low levels of knowledge and safest practice.

In light of the clear weight of evidence of safest practice, there should be a review of current Australian Road Rules relating to child car restraints – particularly for children under two to three years and those aged seven to under 10 years.¹ Laws need to align with safest practice for safe travel of children in cars. Parents rely on and follow the law and may falsely believe they are keeping their child as safe as possible. Updating laws to reflect the expert recommendations for safest use of car restraints will help reduce the number of preventable child deaths and serious injuries resulting from crashes on our roads.

Data source and methods



This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from 25 November to 2 December 2024 to a randomly selected sample stratified by age, sex and state of residence and nationally representative of Australian parents aged 18 and older. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted and eligible to participate, the completion rate was 68%. Parents ($n=1,399$) included in this study had one or more children aged zero to 12 years ($n=2,146$) and reported on whether they had access to a car ($n=1,343$ parents of 2,070 children) and if so the type of car restraint they typically used. They also reported on when and why they transitioned certain children to different types of car restraints. All parents reported on their knowledge of safest practice including the '5 step test' and age at which children can typically move to an adult seat belt alone. All the estimates in this report are weighted to reflect the distribution of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

References



1. *Australian Road Rules, Part 16, Division 3*. Parliamentary Counsel Committee, Canberra, 2023. [Australian-Road-Rules-9June2023-bookmarked.pdf](#)
2. *Neuroscience Research Australia and Kidsafe Australia: Best Practice Guidelines for the Safe Restraint of Children Travelling in Motor Vehicles, 2nd Edition*. Sydney, 2020 [neura.edu.au/resources/common/Best-Practice-Child-Restraint-Guidelines_202009-FINAL_high-res-2-1.pdf](#)
3. *Neuroscience Research Australia and Kidsafe Australia: Best Practice Guidelines for the Safe Restraint of Children Travelling in Motor Vehicles*. Technical Report, Sydney, 2020 [neura.edu.au/resources/common/Technical-Report-Final.pdf](#)
4. *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*. Australia's children. Cat. no. CWS 69 associated data tables. Canberra, 2022. [aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/data](#)

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