



How many car seats will I need?

Any child will generally have three car seats in their life; the infant seat, the convertible car seat, and the booster seat. As the child outgrows each seat, they will use the next one longer than the last. Some parents may choose to skip the infant seat as many convertible car seats will handle a newborn. While this may seem like a cost savings, it tends to make things much more difficult in the long run. Keep in mind too that, while a convertible car seat may be rated down to 5lbs, it doesn't mean that a newborn is going to fit properly in the seat. So let us go through each seat and describe what each one does.

Infant Seats: The infant seat is designed specifically for newborns. The seat keeps the newborn in a more reclined position and is much smaller overall. Infant seats have separate bases that stay in the car and buckets that will stay with the child. These buckets will often secure into strollers making it



very convenient to travel with your newborn. These seats are rear facing only and should NEVER be turned facing forward in the car. When securing the seat in the car, it is important to make sure that the seatback is at a 45 degree angle to keep the baby's head back. Also, when securing the bucket to the base, always make sure that the handle is not in the carrying position. At this stage, parents with multiple cars can purchase extra bases for each car.

The car seat will always come with one base. These seats will generally be rated to 22lbs or 30lbs and between 29in. and 32in.

Convertible Car Seats: The convertible car seat is called that because it can be either rear or forward facing. While they are rated down to 5lbs, most convertible car seats are too large for newborns and don't offer the same level of protection that the infant seat can give a child that small.



Many convertible car seats have height and weight limits of 40lbs and 40in. while some larger seats will handle children up to 65lbs and 49in. Keep in mind that these seats are larger and therefore will not fit in many smaller cars, especially when the seat is rear facing. Most convertible car seats have rear facing weight limits between 30lbs and 35lbs. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a child be rear facing until they reach the maximum rear facing limit on the convertible car seat.



Belt Positioning Booster Seats: The belt positioning booster seat is designed to position the vehicle's seat belts and the child so that they fit each other properly. Until a child is 4'9" or 57in. tall, they don't fit the vehicle's seat belt and safety systems. Beyond the seat belts, how and where the air bags deploy is based upon a person who is 57in. or taller. These seats do not secure into the car so they should be buckled in when the child is not in the car. There are two basic types of belt positioning boosters, the high backed booster and the platform booster.

The high backed booster provided all the side impact protection for the child and is best for a child who is just transitioning into a booster seat. These seats are also more comfortable on trips as the side impact protection doubles as a great place for sleeping heads. When putting these seats in the car, the vehicle's headrest should be removed as it will prevent the seat back from laying against the back of the vehicle's seat properly.

The platform booster provides older children with the lift they need to position the shoulder and lap belts properly. This kind of seat is especially helpful for kids who are six and over who might be more self conscious about being in a booster seat as they are less obvious. These seats, however, are generally not suitable for the 3 or 4 year old who is just going into a booster seat and they provide NO side impact protection.

How long with each car seat last?

This is one of the more common questions Child Passenger Safety Specialists run into everyday. Unfortunately for parents and to the disappointment of many car seat manufacturers, there is no definitive answer. All car seats have height and weight limits which are written in at least one language on the side of the car seat. When a child reaches ONE of these limits, then it is time to move to the next stage seat. So in short, it all depends upon your baby.

In general, most kids reach the height limit before they reach the weight limit on any of the three basic types of car seats. The good news is that the child will use the next stage seat longer than they used the last.

The infant seat tends to be used for the shortest length of time, just remember that this is also the time when the baby is most vulnerable. In general, an infant will last between 7 and 13 months, depending upon the seat and the baby. Of course, some parents will get less time while others may get more, it all depends upon the baby.



Depending upon the convertible car seat, a child can be in one from the time they outgrow the infant seat until they are between 3 and 6 years old, depending upon the limits of the seat and the size of the child. A seat with a limit of 40lbs and 40in. will generally last until a child is between 3 and 4, but again, this depends upon the child.

Besides having a maximum height limit, the booster seat also has a minimum height requirement of either 37in. or 38in. depending upon the seat. A child has to be at least this height or they won't fit in the seat properly. While many manufacturers rate their booster seats down to 30lbs, it is recommended that the child be as close to 40lbs as possible. The 57in mark, which is when they child will be able to sit in the vehicle's seat unassisted, often comes between 8 and 12 years old.

What is the safest seat?

While it would be far easier to say that this one seat, or that one seat is the safest seat, the reality is that there is no one seat that is the safest seat. There are far too many different vehicles and far too many different kids to be able to narrow the choices down to a simple, "pick this one." Because of this, one should always be wary of magazines, articles, or books that pick the "safest" or "best" seat. Given the kinds of variables that the book or magazine article simply can't know, it is impossible to choose one seat as the "best" or "safest."

That being said, the rule that Child Passenger Safety Specialists follow is this: **The safest seat is the one that fits in your car best, is appropriate for your child, and is easiest for the parent to use.** This will not be the same seat for everyone and cannot be properly determined without knowing the kind of car the parent has and in many cases the size and age of the child. Magazines and books may be able to tell people about the features of a car seat, but they cannot make a determination as to whether one seat or another is the "safest" or the "best" for you.



What about Combination Seats?

A Combination seat is a forward facing harnessed car seat that will convert to a booster seat later. Some will convert to high backed boosters while others will convert to platform boosters. These seats are great for a child who is too young to go into a belt positioning booster seat but has to give up their convertible car seat for a younger sibling. Always check to see what height the seat will go to as a booster as some will not go to the 57in. mark. . If the seat doesn't go to 57in. as a booster, then the parent will have to purchase another seat afterwards. Also, check to see the limits on the harness in both height and weight, there



are some combination seats that only go to 40lbs and 42in. and this will not help extend the life of the seat much. At the same time, there are seats that will harness a child to 80lbs or 53in, which will enable the child to stay in the 5-point harness longer. There will always be separate limits for the seat with the harness and when it is converted as a booster.

What about 3-in-1 seats?

There are seats on the market today that claim to be “the only car seat you will ever need.” When looking at the limits on the seat however, one can plainly see that this simply is not true. Many of these seats only go to 52in. in height and therefore require the parent to purchase another seat later. Add to this the fact that the harnesses on these seats go to the same limits of 40lbs and 40in. as much smaller seats and it becomes clear that these seats are not the best options for parents.

The 3-in-1 car seat tends to be very large, making it difficult to fit into mid-sized or smaller cars. They also tend to work better forward facing that rear facing, thus making them more difficult to use. So when it comes to the “jack of all trades” car seat, remember that they tend to do a poor job of each type of seat they convert to.

We’re having another baby, so can I reuse my car seat?

All car seats have a lifespan of 6 years, so if you are having a second child and want to reuse the infant or convertible car seat, go right ahead as long as the seat is less than 6 years old and has never been in a crash.

I’ve been in a car crash, can I still use the same car seat?

If you’ve been in a crash, the car seat **MUST** be replaced. There are internal parts of a seat that will not show apparent damage or stress. Because of this, any car seat that has been involved in a crash must be replaced. Most insurance companies will include this in any insurance claim estimate. If they are hesitant to do so, usually a call from your town’s safety officer will clear things up.

Why can’t I just get a second hand seat?

This is one area where getting used is definitely **NOT** a good idea. When buying a used seat at a consignment shop or tag sale there is no way to tell if the seat has been in a crash, if it has been recalled, or if it has all the parts it is supposed to. The only time anyone should accept a used seat is when you can verify the history of the seat, you know it’s never been in a crash, you that everything



that is supposed to come with the seat is with it, and you know it's never been recalled. Given what is at stake, would you really want to take a chance?

There are so many cool products that I can get for my car seat, what do I need with it?

As a rule, what comes with your car seat is tested with it and the manufacturer is never going to recommend adding anything that doesn't come with your car seat. Another thing to remember is that, while car seats have to pass very strict and thorough federal requirements, there are NO laws or requirements for aftermarket products. Never assume that simply because a manufacturer makes a product that it is going to be safe to put in a car or car seat. That being said, there are some very good products on the market that will help keep your baby warm in their infant seat, keep the sun shaded, and protect your seat from then inevitable crushed cereal. When it comes to sunshades, the type that stick on with static cling are best and when it comes to keeping your baby warm, a good receiving blanket or a product that goes over the top of the car seat, but not behind your child, is best. Seat protectors should be as thin as possible so as not to interfere with the installation of the car seat. Whenever you are looking at any aftermarket product, always ask yourself these questions, "Is this going to be a projectile in my car or a choking hazard for my baby?" and "Is this going to place something in my baby's car seat that shouldn't be there?"

Car Seat Myths

1. **Every car seat fits in every car.** The reality is that the opposite is true. There are some car seats that are simply not very compatible with many cars. Likewise, there are some cars that are simply not very good with car seats. The kind of car you have is the biggest variable in choosing the best car seat for you.
2. **The more expensive the car seat the better it is.** While in some cases you do get what you pay for, just because a car seat is expensive doesn't mean that it will be necessarily better or the best choice.
3. **Since all car seats have to pass the same standards, then they are all the same.** While it is true that car seats have to pass the same standards, some offer safety features that protect a child even beyond what is required by the federal standards.
4. **My pediatrician will know when to turn my child forward facing.** The sad fact of life is that most pediatricians don't know what their own association recommends. **The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a child be rear facing until they reach the**



maximum rear facing limit on the convertible car seat. Your pediatrician is an expert in your child's health, not child passenger safety.

5. *It is better to have my child forward facing, that way I can keep an eye on him or her.*

While many parents are in a hurry to turn their child forward, the fact is that your child is always safer rear facing than they are forward facing. How much of a difference is there? The latest studies show that a child under 2 is **five times** more likely to be injured when they are forward facing than if they were rear facing. When one considers what happens in a crash, the reasons become obvious. The child is compressed into the back of the car seat, with the seat absorbing all the inertia. When the child is forward facing, there is nothing to keep the head, which is about 25% of a child's body mass compared to 6% on an adult, and extremities from flying forward. This usually results in a greater chance of a serious neck or shoulder injury.

6. *The laws of my state are sufficient to keep my child safe.* Every state has different legal obligations regarding how long a child should be rear facing and how long a child needs to be in a child seat. These laws represent the BARE MINIMUM, not the safest practice. They should be treated as the least parents should be doing, rather than the most.

7. *I should always consult Consumer Reports or Baby Bargains books for the best car seat.* While these kinds of publications are helpful in telling parents about car seats, they have no way of determining what the "best" or "safest" car seat is for you. The reason why they can't do this is because the biggest variable in choosing the safest and best car seat is your car, and there is no way a book or magazine can know the kind of car you drive. Also, be wary of any publication that says, "buy only this or that seat." Every car seat has its pros and cons and just because a seat may work well in one vehicle doesn't mean it will work well in all vehicles. No matter what safety features a seat may have, if it doesn't fit in your car properly, it won't be as safe as a seat that does.

Conclusion

So as we've seen, there are many different car seats, and at some point your baby will be in an infant carrier, a convertible car seat, and a belt positioning booster seat. When that happens is up to your child, but it will happen. The good news is that, properly installed and used, your child will be the safest person in the car.