

ASK THE VEHICLE SAFETY LAWYER – Child Seats

I am about to become a first time parent and want to know the safest car seat for my newborn. What is the safest child seat on the market?

Rather than furnish a brand name of a particular rear facing child seat, let me tell you about the critical components you want to look for as a parent when selecting a rear facing child seat.

First, you want to buy a child seat that has a 5-point belt system rather than a 3-point belt system. A 5-point belt system has a strap that goes over each shoulder, a strap that goes over each thigh and a strap that goes between the legs. On the other hand, a 3-point belt has a strap that goes over each shoulder and a strap that goes between the child's legs. The problem with a 3-point child seat design arises in the event of a rollover accident and there is no strap over the child's thighs that help prevent ejection. An occupant is 13 times more likely to suffer serious to fatal injuries if they are ejected from a vehicle.

Second, you want to compare the plastic shell of the child seats. Specifically, look at the thickness of the material. You don't want a weak, flimsy shell protecting your child. Also, look to see if the shell is reinforced with a tubular frame.

Third, compare the weight of the child seats. Most infant child seats are the same size. However, if one is considerably heavier than the others, ask yourself what is adding to the weight. The answer could be hidden reinforcements.

Fourth, compare the side profile of the child seat to see if the child seat will provide side impact protection. Place your child in the child seat and see where his/her head and chest is in relationship to the side of the child seat. You want the child seat to have side wings that extend beyond the child's head and chest.

Fifth, you want see how the child seat fits into your vehicle. Some vehicle rear seats simply don't accommodate a child seat as well as other vehicles. Put the child seat into the rear seat, preferably the center rear seat. Use the LATCH attachment that will come with the new child seat and attach to your vehicle's LATCH system. (there is an emblem on each seat of vehicles that have a built-in LATCH system) If your vehicle contains a LATCH system, you don't need to use the vehicle's seat belt. Use the tether device that is on child seats sold after September 2002. (the tether attaches the top portion of the child seat to the vehicle via a clip).

If you have an older vehicle, then use the vehicle's seatbelt system to attach the child seat. Pull the vehicle seat belt all the way out so that a locking system is engaged and route the vehicle seat belt through the slot for rear facing only child seats. The most important aspect of child seat installation is to make certain the child seat is tightly secured to the vehicle. Stick your knee in the child seat and pull on the LATCH or vehicle seatbelt strap. Make certain the child seat does not move from side-to-side or move forward. You want the child seat to be rigidly in place. If you cannot install the

child seat where it becomes rigidly attached to the vehicle, don't buy that particular child seat or use a different vehicle.

Sixth, buy a true child seat rather than a combination child seat and child carrier.

Seventh, remember that until your baby is **ONE YEAR OLD AND WEIGHS AT LEAST 20 POUNDS**, that they must sit in a rear facing child seat. Children who are less than one year old and weigh less than 20 pounds can be seriously injured or killed if they are placed in a forward facing child seat before their body is ready.

Eighth, if you have any problems installing your rear facing child seat, **DON'T HESITATE TO CALL YOUR LOCAL POLICE DEPARTMENT** and ask if they have a certified child seat installer. Recent studies have shown that 85% of all child fatalities in child seats occurred due to some type of child seat installation misuse.

Ninth, don't be cheap. Spending \$200.00 now is a small price compared to the consequences of having your child seriously injured because you wanted to save a few dollars.