

# Choosing a Car for Family Safety

## Features to Look for When Shopping

### Think Safety Before Buying A New or Used Car

Some cars (including pickup trucks, vans, and SUVs) have features that make it easier to keep your children safe (see picture below). Take the time to check out the car before you buy it. Keep safety in mind.

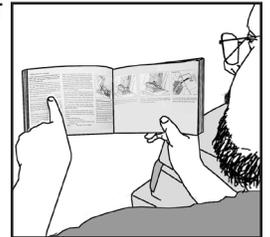
### Learning About Cars

You can find plenty of safety information about new and used cars (see Resources, page 2).

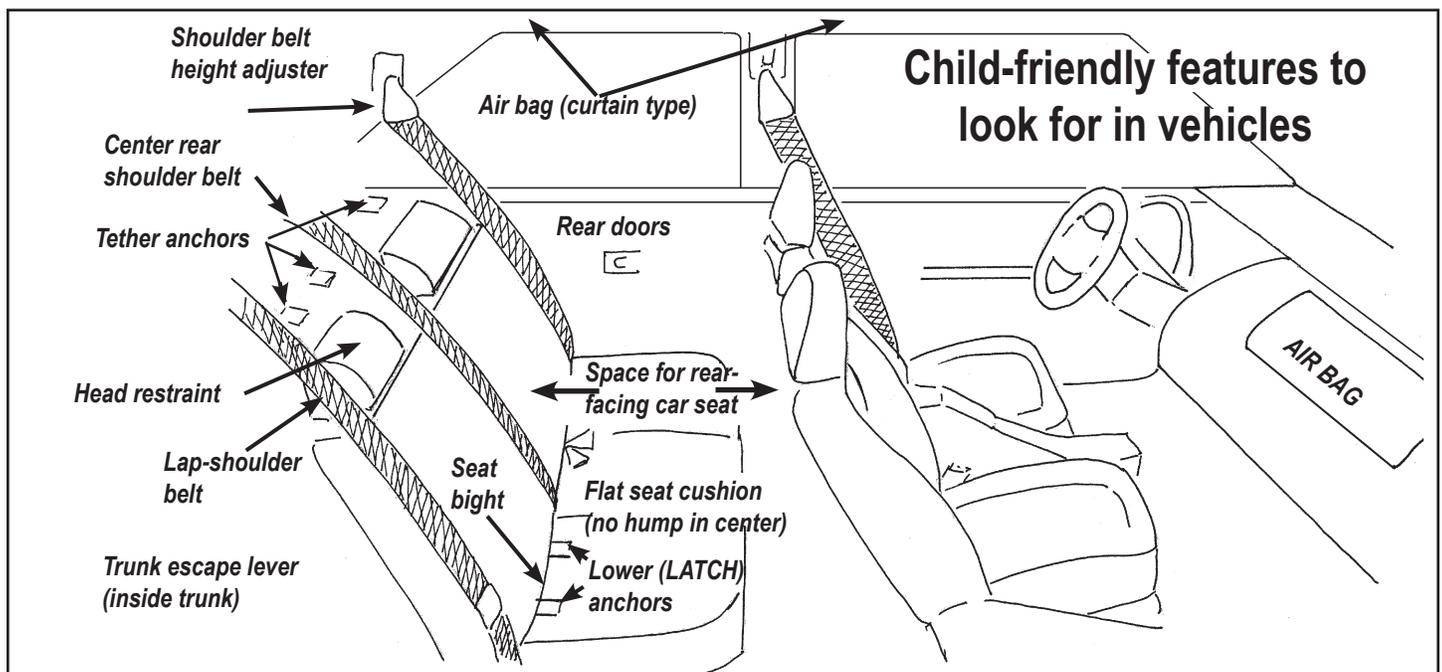
Before buying a car, ask to see the vehicle owner's manual. Look up "safety" and "child restraints." Newer car manuals have more details about safety features than manuals for older cars. If a used car doesn't have a manual, ask the dealer to order one.

### Basics for Choosing a Safer Family Car

- ✓ **A big car** is generally safer than a small car. However, smaller, newer cars often have better safety features than older, larger ones.
- ✓ **Space and easy access for children's car seats.** Make sure there is enough room in the back seat to install them correctly. Look for a flat back seat. Rear-facing car seats fit better in cars that have good "leg room" in the back seat. A car with four doors allows easier access to the back seat than one with only two.
- ✓ **Enough seating positions in the back seat** for all children under 13 who will ride in the car. Sitting in the back seat cuts the chance of serious injury to children by 43 percent.
- ✓ **LATCH systems and tether anchors** are helpful for installing car seats. Tether anchors improve safety for children in forward-facing car seats.
- ✓ **Seat belt features that work best for children:**
  - Lap belts attached where the cushions meet.
  - Shoulder belts in all positions—needed for boosters.
  - Shoulder belts with height adjusters.
  - Belts that lock tightly around a car seat (since 1996).
- ✓ **Head restraints for all passengers.**
- ✓ **Know the location of air bags** (see page 2). Air bags make cars safer for most passengers. But, beware: A front passenger air bag can kill a rear-facing baby or a child riding unbuckled or leaning forward in the front seat. **NEVER** put a baby in front with an air bag that is not turned off.
- ✓ **Small pickup trucks and sports cars are not for families.** Your child may have to ride in front if there is not a back seat or it is too small. (See page 2.)



Use the car owner's manual to learn about installing a car seat.



▲ **Air bags** help protect adults, but in a crash a front passenger air bag (picture, below) can kill a baby in a rear-facing car seat. Put babies in back!

Cars made since 1998–99 have front air bags. Many earlier cars also have them. Look for the label “AIR BAG” or letters “SRS” or “SIR” on the right side of the dashboard. There also are warning labels on the sun visor or doorframe.

Advanced air bags in newer cars help protect front seat passengers. **But**, children are still much safer in back.



Small trucks and sports cars with air bags often do not have space in the back seat for a rear-facing car seat. Only buy this kind of vehicle if it has an air bag on-off switch or a sensor that turns the passenger air bag off. Make sure the air bag is **off** if a child is riding in the front seat. Make sure it is turned **on** for adults.

▲ **Side-impact air bags** are in the backseat of many newer cars. (Read the owner’s manual.) Some cover side windows (called “curtains”). Others come out below the windows. Side air bags help protect children properly buckled into car seats.

Many newer cars have been tested to make sure their side air bags will not harm out-of-position children. Still, it is best to keep children from leaning against the side of the car. A booster

with a high back can help keep a child in place while sleeping.

▲ **Plenty of space (front to back) in the rear seat** is needed for larger rear-facing car seats.

▲ **A flat bench seat is best** if you want to place your child in the center (the safest position) or need to put three children in back. It is hard to install a car seat in the center if the vehicle seat has a hump or hollow. If you will have three children in back, check for fit side to side.

▲ **Avoid pickup truck seats that must be folded down** to install a car seat. These make installing car seats very difficult, and the hard seating surface could affect car seat performance.

**IMPORTANT!** Car seats can only be put in forward-facing vehicle seats. Side-facing seats are dangerous for car seats and older children.

▲ **LATCH (Lower Anchors and Tethers for CHildren)**, also called ISOFIX or Universal Anchorage, is a way to install a car seat without a seat belt. (See the car owner’s manual.)

**Lower anchors** are in all cars since 2004 and in some older models. Small symbols (right) or “Isofix” tags mark hidden anchors. Lower anchors are usually in two side seats in back. Some cars have them in the center position (see car manual). If lower anchors can’t be used in the center, use the seat belt there instead. LATCH is convenient, not safer.

**Tether anchors** can be used to make forward-facing car seats even safer. **Use them!** Since 2000, most cars have at least three seating positions with a tether anchor. They are often marked with a symbol (right). Many older cars can have tether anchors added. Check the car owner’s manual or ask a dealer.



▲ **Seat belts attached where the cushions meet** can hold a car seat securely in place. Avoid belts attached more than one inch forward of the seat back. Look for seat belts that do not overlap one another when buckled.

▲ **Lap-shoulder belts** are safer than lap-only belts. They are needed for older children and those using boosters. Lap-shoulder belts have been required in side seat positions since 1989. Newer cars must also have them in the center rear.

▲ **Shoulder belt height adjusters** in the car help shoulder belts fit better.

▲ **Head restraints for everyone** in the car are important. They protect the head and neck in a crash. However, if a head restraint tilts forward, a tall forward-facing car seat may not fit well. Look for head restraints that can be removed or adjusted as needed.

▲ **Safe window switches** are ones that only raise the windows when the switches are pulled *up*, not pushed *down*. This can prevent a child from getting caught. Windows that stop when something is in the way are best.

▲ **Try your car seat(s) in the car before you buy.**

**Resources**

**NHTSA** (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration): Air bag on-off switch information, *Buying a Safer Car* booklet, side air bag information, vehicle lists; 888-327-4236 or 800-424-9153 (tty), [www.safercar.gov](http://www.safercar.gov)

**Shopping for a Safer Car**, booklet, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety: 703-247-1536, [www.iihs.org](http://www.iihs.org)

**Crash tests ratings** of cars, trucks, SUVs: NHTSA: [www.safercar.gov](http://www.safercar.gov); Insurance Institute for Highway Safety: [www.iihs.org](http://www.iihs.org)

**SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.**, national advocacy group: technical assistance with using car seats; 800-745-7233, [www.carseat.org](http://www.carseat.org)

**Child Passenger Safety Inspection Locations:** 866-866-732-8243, [www.seatcheck.org](http://www.seatcheck.org)

**KidsAndCars.org:** [www.kidsandcars.org](http://www.kidsandcars.org)