

Car Seat Safety Quick Reference

From a Certified Child Passenger Safety Technician

73% of car seats are installed incorrectly. Even the safest car seat won't protect your child if it's not installed and used correctly. Use this guide—but consider getting a professional car seat check!

Installation Check

Test your installation with these checks:

- The seat moves less than 1 inch side-to-side at the belt path
- The seat moves less than 1 inch front-to-back at the belt path
- Using EITHER LATCH or seatbelt (not both, unless manual says otherwise)
- Rear-facing: Recline angle is correct (check indicator on seat)
- Seatbelt is locked (check your vehicle manual for locking method)

Harness Check

- Harness straps lie flat (no twists)
- Rear-facing: Straps at or BELOW shoulders
- Forward-facing: Straps at or ABOVE shoulders
- Chest clip at armpit level (not on belly or neck)
- Pinch test: Cannot pinch any slack at the shoulder

The Pinch Test

After tightening the harness, try to pinch the strap at your child's shoulder:

- If you CAN pinch a fold of webbing = too loose
- If you CANNOT pinch any webbing = correct

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Turning forward-facing too early (keep rear-facing as long as possible)
- Loose harness (remember the pinch test)
- Chest clip too low (should be at armpit level)
- Bulky winter coats under harness (put coat on backward OVER harness)
- Aftermarket accessories (only use what came with the seat)
- Using an expired or crashed car seat

Winter Safety

Puffy coats compress in a crash, creating slack in the harness.

Safe alternative:

- Strap baby in WITHOUT the coat
- Put a blanket over the harness
- OR turn the coat backward and put over buckled child

When to Schedule a Car Seat Check

- Before baby is born (around 36 weeks)
- When you get a new car seat
- When transitioning to a different type of seat
- After a car accident (any severity)
- When moving the seat to a different vehicle
- If anything ever feels "off"

Car Seat Stages

Rear-Facing (Infant & Convertible)

- Birth until at least age 2, or until reaching max height/weight for rear-facing
- Best protection for head, neck, and spine

Forward-Facing (with harness)

- After outgrowing rear-facing limits, until reaching max height/weight for harness
- Keep in harness as long as possible

Booster Seat

- After outgrowing forward-facing harness, until seatbelt fits properly
- Usually 8-12 years old and 4'9" tall

As a certified CPST, I offer free car seat checks for my doula clients and affordable standalone checks for all families. Don't guess—get it checked!

