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Tips for Car Travel After the First Year

Car trips should be a pleasant time for you and your child. It is a good time for pleasant conversation and for teaching your child how to behave in the car. Correct placement in an approved child restraint device is the safest way to travel, even for short trips, for your child.

For kids more than a year old and between 20 and 40 pounds, you will need a forward-facing car seat. Read the directions that come with the car seat. Kids between 40 and 80 pounds and less than 4 foot 9 inches tall can use a booster seat. A booster seat makes lap and shoulder belts fit correctly over the upper thighs and hips and over the shoulder. Seat belts can be used for children over 80 pounds and taller than 4 feet 9 inches tall.

At any age, put the safety seat in the back seat of the car. It is much safer than the front seat. If your car has an airbag on the passenger side of the front seat, never place your child in the front seat. The airbag can actually hurt young children.

If your child is over 1 year old and has not ridden in a car safety seat before, follow these guidelines to help your child get used to the safety seat.

- Show the car safety seat to your child. Let him touch it and check it out. Be calm and matter-of-fact as your child learns about it.
- Make sure the car seat is installed correctly in the car. Read the instructions carefully. If you aren't sure if your seat fits properly in your car, contact a children's hospital or local fire department. Many of them have a child seat loaner program and can help you find a seat that fits properly and help you install it correctly.
- Set rules such as no throwing anything in the car, no playing with door locks or windows, and no unfastening safety belts. Remind your child about the rules of behavior before all car rides.
- Your first rides with the safety seat should be short practice rides, perhaps around the block. Point out interesting things that your child can see. Make it a positive experience for both of you.
- Praise your child often for behaving well. (For example: "Mike, you are sitting so quietly in your seat. Mommy is proud of you. You are a good boy....") You cannot praise your child too often.
- Include your child in pleasant conversation. (For example: "That was sure a good lunch. You really like hot dogs." or "You were a big help to me in the store." or "It'll be fun visiting grandma....")
- This is also a good time to teach your child about the world. (For example, "Callie, see that big, red, fire truck? Look at how fast it is going. What do firemen do? The light on the top is red. What else is red?") What you teach needs to be geared to the age of your child.
- With your frequent praise, teaching, and pleasant conversation, your child will stay interested and busy. He will pay attention to you instead of trying to get out of the seat.
- If your child even begins to try to release the seat belt or to climb out of the car seat, immediately tell him "No" in a firm voice. On your first few trips, pull over and stop and don't start driving the car until all is quiet. Also, state the rule clearly: "Do not take off your seat belt." Discipline your child if he tries to get out of the seat.
- Ignore yelling, screaming, and begging. As soon as your child is quiet, praise her for being quiet. You also should not yell, scream, and beg. Stay calm and matter-of-fact. Keep your child busy in conversation and looking at her world. Do not let your child out of the seat while you are traveling. This only teaches your child that yelling, screaming, and begging will finally get you to let her do what she wants.
- Older siblings should also be expected to behave well. If the young child sees an older sibling climbing or hanging out the window, he will want to do it also. Include older siblings in the conversation, praise, and teaching.

Tips for Car Travel after the First Year

Page 2

- Right after the ride, reward your child with 5 to 10 minutes of your time doing something that your child likes. For example, you might read a story or play a game, or let your child help fix lunch or put away the groceries. Do not get into the habit of buying presents for her good behavior. She enjoys time with you and it's less expensive and more rewarding for both of you.
- If your child is going to travel in a car with other drivers (grandparent, aunt, uncle, or baby sitter), make sure that they use the car safety seat. Make sure it is correctly fastened with the car seat belt.
- Never allow children to ride in the cargo area of a pick-up truck, minivan, or station wagon.
- Park where your child can get out of the car on the sidewalk side away from traffic. Never leave a child unattended in a parked car even for a minute.
- Do not have packages or heavy or sharp objects loose in the car. A sudden stop can cause them to shift and injure passengers.
- To help prevent choking, avoid lollipops, ice cream bars on a stick, and drinks with straws. Do not let children eat in a moving car.
- Hot belt and harness buckles can cause burns. Cover metal parts during hot weather.
- Make sure all doors are locked before starting the car. Teach children never to play with doors and locks.
- Carry a first aid kit and a fire extinguisher in your car.

In all states it is illegal for a child to ride in the car without being securely buckled into a safety seat. It is illegal because it is very, very dangerous. Please do what is best for your child--use a safety seat during every car ride.

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