A Safe Ride for Children With Special Needs
Every Child Deserves the Best Protection!

Every child deserves the best possible protection from injury while riding in a car. The car seat laws of some states exempt children with medical conditions. However, any child riding without proper protection is at risk of injury, even in a minor crash.

Your child may have a condition that affects his ability to fit in or use a regular car safety seat (car seat), booster seat, or seat belt. There are car seats that are designed and tested for most special needs.

Which car seat is right for your child?

ONLY car seats meeting federal government standards or products modified and crash tested for special needs transport should be used. Do not make homemade changes to car seats. That can change the safety of the car seat.

For help finding the right car seat, talk to a healthcare provider who works with your child and knows about car safety. (See Resources on page 2.)

Conditions That May Require Special Attention

Too small

Premature and low birth weight infants are too small for many car seats. Some may need a car bed. (See the SRN Preemie fact sheet, Resources.)

Children should ride in a properly fitting car seat or booster as long as possible. Expect children who are very small to ride in each car seat stage longer than others their age.

Too big

Some children outgrow a regular car seat but still need support. Vests and car seats with harnesses that fit large children are available. (See Resources.)

Difficulty sitting upright

Children with neuromuscular conditions may need positioning pads to sit up well. Speciality car seats and pads may be needed.

Medical fragility

Children with conditions such as low-tone, tracheostomy, an omphalocele, or brittle bones may require a car seat with special features and/or that can keep them rear facing a long time.

Hip and leg casts

Children in casts may not fit their usual car seat. A child in a spica cast may need to use a special car seat (Snug Seat Hippo–see picture on page 2). A larger child in a long-leg cast can lie flat in a Modified E-Z-ON Vest (picture below). Discuss car seat fit with the doctor before casting, if possible.

Impaired mobility

Wheelchair users too heavy to transfer to a car seat need a crash-tested wheelchair made for travel in a motor vehicle.

Behavioral challenges

First, try a behavior modification plan. For children who still will not stay in a car seat, an E-Z-ON Vest that opens in the back is an option. Also, Merritt Manufacturing makes products to keep kids from unbuckling a car seat.

Make Every Ride A Safe Ride
Travel Tips for Children With Special Needs

- **The safest way** for a medically fragile child to ride depends on her size and condition. Limit travel as much as possible to reduce the risk of a crash.
- **The back seat is the safest place** for children. If your child needs to be watched at all times, have an adult ride in the back seat with him.
- If you must transport a child in the **front seat**, the front passenger air bag must be turned off. Pickup trucks or sports cars with very small back seats sometimes have an on-off switch. Newer cars have air bag sensors that shut off the air bag or reduce its power when a child is in the front. Check the light on the dashboard to make sure that the sensor has turned off the air bag.
- **Plan to stop often** on long rides.
- **Have a medical care plan** with you in case of an emergency. Take along the names and numbers of healthcare providers and equipment suppliers.
- If your child needs battery-powered equipment, have enough power for twice the expected travel time.
- **Secure medical equipment** to keep it from being thrown around during a crash. Buckle an unused seat belt around it or put it on the floor and wedge pillows around it.
- **Make sure all caregivers** who transport your child follow your directions about buckling up your child.

Crashworthy Wheelchairs

Some wheelchair systems meet voluntary standards (WC-18, -19, and -20) for crash protection in a motor vehicle. Models for children under 50 pounds may have a crashworthy five-point harness. However, if possible, move a child into a car seat that fits her size and condition when traveling.

If using a wheelchair in a vehicle, it **MUST** face forward and be anchored at four points. A separate lap-shoulder belt must also be used. Remove hard attachments such as trays or medical equipment and stow them for travel. For more wheelchair safety information, see Resources.

Air Bag On-Off Switches

If there is no way to turn off the air bag, and your child requires monitoring in the front seat, you can request permission from NHTSA to have a mechanic install an on-off switch. (See Resources.)

School Bus Transport

Young children with special transport needs often ride on school buses. Appropriate transport (including car seats or other safety restraints) should be part of the individualized education program (IEP) for each child. Parents should make sure that they understand and agree with what is recommended.

Some school buses have factory-installed seat belts or LATCH lower anchors for installing car seats. Belts must meet federal safety standards. Some buses have built-in safety harnesses or use car seats made just for buses. The School Bus Safety Handbook is a guide to using child safety restraint systems on school buses. (See Resources.)

Support and Positioning

- A medical therapist can help you use rolled cloths or foam wedges to pad alongside the child’s body and head. They may say to use a very soft neck collar for head support.
- Do not put extra padding **under** the child or **behind** his back. Thick pads or clothes prevent the harness from fitting snugly enough to hold him in a crash.
- Large children who need torso support can use a size-appropriate safety vest, car seat, or a specially booster with a positioning harness.
- When a child is able to ride in only a seat belt, do not recline the vehicle seatback. In a crash, this could allow the child to slide under the lap belt and be seriously injured.

This child with a spica cast rides in a Hippo car seat from Snug Seat that’s specially made for children in hip casts.

**Resources**

- Technicians w/ Special Needs Training: Go to http://cert.safekids.org and filter for Special Needs under “Find a Tech.”
- **List of car seats**, including ones with high harness weight limits, www.healthychildren.org (look under “On the Go”)
- NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration): general child restraint information, recalls, air bag switches, and school bus safety information; the Vehicle Safety Hotline, 888-327-4236 or 800-424-9153 (tty), www.safercar.gov
- State/local assistance programs: Some Easter Seals affiliates, children’s hospitals, and special education centers have car seat loan programs for specialty products. Call local programs or your state’s office of traffic safety.
- **Safe Ride News**: newsletter; fact sheets on child safety, The School Bus Safety Handbook (safety restraints and wheelchairs on buses); 800-403-1424, www.saferidenews.com
- Wheelchairs for motor vehicle use: free pamphlet from Univ. of Michigan Transportation Research Institute, 734-764-2171, www.travelsafer.org
- Find a local Child Passenger Safety Checkup Location: 866-732-8243; www.seatcheck.org

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