



Understanding California's Child Safety Seat Law

What's the law?

NEW! Effective January 1, 2012, California law requires that all children *under age 8* must be properly buckled into a car seat or booster in the back seat.

Children age 8 or older may use the vehicle seat belt if it fits properly with the lap belt low on the hips, touching the upper thighs, and the shoulder belt crossing the center of the chest. If children are not tall enough for proper belt fit, they must ride in a booster or car seat.

Everyone in the car must be properly buckled up. For each child under 16 who is not properly secured, parents (if in the car) or drivers can be fined more than \$475 and get a point on their driving records.

Why is it necessary?

Studies have shown that children are far more likely to ride in car seats and booster seats if state law requires it. Many parents rely on state laws to guide them in determining how to best protect their children. Using car seats, booster seats and seat belts the right way on every ride – lap belt low on the hips touching the upper thighs and shoulder belt crossing the chest – saves lives.

Seat belts are designed for adults and do not properly fit children under 4'9" tall, regardless of the child's weight. A booster simply "boosts" the child up in order to make the adult-sized belt safely fit a child-sized body. According to researchers at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, booster seats, which reposition the seat belt across the strongest bones of the child's body, reduce injury risk for children 4-8 years old by 45% compared to seat belts alone. If the belt crosses the child's waist instead of the hips or thigh bones, the child risks damage to internal organs and/or a spinal cord injury if involved in a collision.

Is my 8-year-old ready for a seat belt?

Once a child reaches 8 years of age, parents should use this simple 5-step test to determine if their child can safely ride in a seat belt alone.

5-Step Test:

1. Can the child sit all the way back against the auto seat?
2. Do the child's knees bend naturally over the seat cushion edge?
3. Does the lap belt cross the top of the hips/thighs, not the tummy?
4. Is the shoulder belt centered on the shoulder and chest?
5. Can the child stay seated in this position the whole trip?

If you cannot answer "yes" to all 5 steps above, your child must remain in a booster seat until the seat belt alone fits properly. Your child's weight is not a factor in determining proper fit. **NOTE! *Belt-positioning boosters cannot be used with only a lap belt!*** (See your car dealer for a lap/shoulder belt retrofit.)

Key Safety Points:

1. Set a good example for your child by using a seat belt on every trip, no matter how short.
2. Ensure that your child is *properly* secured in a car seat, booster or seat belt on every trip.
3. Use the best safety seat system for your child's size and follow the manufacturer's instructions.
4. Keep your infant in a rear-facing seat as long as possible, ideally until age 2 or until the infant reaches the upper weight and height limit for that particular seat.
5. Never seat a child in front of an airbag.
6. Keep your child in the back seat until age 13.