

Is your child ready for the seat belt?

By Lorri Coop

Many parents are under the impression that a child can be moved to the vehicle seat belt system when they have outgrown the weight limits of their child safety seat. However, most children exceed the weight limits of the seat before they are tall enough to fit in the vehicle lap/shoulder belt. So, how do you know?

Ask these five questions for your answer.

1. Is the child at least 8 years old and taller than 4 feet 9 inches?
2. Do the child's knees bend comfortably at the edge of the vehicle?
3. Does the belt cross the shoulder between the neck and arm?
4. Is the lap belt as low as possible, touching the thighs?
5. Can the child stay seated like this for the whole trip?

If you answered 'no' to any of these questions, your child needs a booster seat to make both the shoulder belt and the lap belt fit right for the best crash protection. Your child will be more comfortable, too.

Safety belts are part of the safety equipment in the vehicle – and they are designed for adults who are at least 4'9" tall – not children.

Instead of fitting properly over the lower hips, the lap belt rides over the soft

tissues of the abdomen and can cause severe injury or death. The shoulder portion of the belt hits the child's neck or face instead of lying flat across the chest. This causes many children to place the shoulder belt behind their back, leaving them with no upper body protection. A booster seat 'boosts' the child up so the lap/shoulder belt will fit correctly and provide protection in a crash.

Correctly using a booster seat can protect a child from being thrown around the vehicle or being totally ejected in a crash. In a crash, children who are incorrectly restrained by a lap/shoulder belt are likely to sustain serious injuries to internal organs as well as the head and spinal cord. In fact, these abdominal and spinal injuries are medically referred to as "Seat Belt Syndrome."

Motor vehicle crashes continue to be the leading cause of death for children ages three and up. Child safety seats, including boosters, have been proven to be effective in preventing injuries and deaths. Studies show that booster seats can reduce the risk of injury by 59% for children ages 4-7, but children in this age group are the least likely to be properly restrained. All children younger than 8 years old, unless taller than 4'9", are required to be in the appropriate child safety seat system wherever they ride in a passenger vehicle, yet in 2011, 41% of Texas booster-seat age children killed in motor vehicle crashes were unrestrained.

The Knox Extension Office currently has a supply of booster seats available to families in need. Contact us at 940-459-2651 to see about getting your child a booster seat today.