

# STATUS

# REPORT

INSURANCE INSTITUTE  
FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY

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## ***BOOSTERS ARE BETTER***

than they used to be at fitting lap and shoulder belts on 4 to 8 year-olds to restrain them in crashes. So parents don't have to search as hard for a good fit for their child and their vehicle. Most belt-positioning boosters, though, don't offer consistently good fit in all vehicles. This is the bottom line in the Institute's third round of booster evaluations. Researchers assessed the safety belt fit of 72 boosters, assigning the best ones the top ratings of *BEST BET* or *GOOD BET* because they correctly position belts on average booster-age kids in most vehicles. The worst performers are ones the Institute doesn't recommend because they do a poor job of fitting belts. Good boosters route



the lap belt across a child's upper thighs and position the shoulder belt at midshoulder. The Institute doesn't conduct crash tests to evaluate boosters. The focus is on belt fit, not crash performance.

"For the first time top-rated boosters outnumber ones the Institute doesn't recommend," says Anne McCartt, Institute senior vice president for research. "Now more than ever manufacturers are paying attention to belt fit, and it's showing up in our ratings."

Twenty-one boosters are *BEST BET* models, and 7 earn *GOOD BET*. Another 8 aren't recommended at all (go to [iihs.org](http://iihs.org) for booster seat pictures and model numbers). This represents a market shift. Last year only 9 seats out of 60 the Institute evaluated earned *BEST BET*.

Even though poor performers make up a smaller percentage of boosters evaluated this year, 36 fall in the middle because they don't consistently fit belts well on most kids in most cars, minivans, and SUVs (see list on p.6). Most of these are backless boosters with good lap belt scores but not good shoulder belt scores.

"Unlike the top performers, consumers can't assume boosters in the in-between group will work in every family vehicle. Some may be fine, but parents still need to try them out to see if the lap and shoulder belts fit their kids correctly," McCartt says. Obvious red flags are lap belts that ride up on the tummy and shoulder belts that either fall off the shoulder or rub against a child's neck. McCartt advises parents to keep looking until they find a booster that fits.

these simulations don't tell parents how boosters will fit kids in their cars. Every state and the District of Columbia has a child restraint law, but they differ when it comes to booster-age kids. In 27 states and DC, the laws cover kids until age 8, with exceptions for size (go to [iihs.org/laws](http://iihs.org/laws)).

The Institute in 2008 began evaluating boosters to help make selecting appropriate ones less of a guessing game (see *Status Report*, Oct. 1, 2008, and Dec. 22, 2009; on the web at [iihs.org](http://iihs.org)). Since then some manufacturers have adopted the Institute's test protocol and booster seat fixture to help evaluate belt fit on the new boosters they're designing. Britax Child Safety Inc. is one. The North Carolina-based company has 1 *BEST BET* (Britax Frontier 85) and 1 *GOOD BET* (Britax Parkway SG) this year.

The "protocols have been invaluable in confirming that our booster seats are designed to maximize belt placement and fit," Britax says.

Belts do the main job of keeping kids in boosters safe in crashes, but belts along with vehicle seats are designed for grown-ups, not children, so it's important for boosters to lift kids into position for lap/shoulder belts to provide proper restraint. Children 4-8 who ride in boosters are 45 percent less likely to sustain injuries in crashes than children restrained by belts alone.

### HARMONY'S DREAMTIME

is the only dual-use booster that earns the Institute's *BEST BET* designation in both the highback and backless modes. Harmony has 5 *BEST BET* models, more than any other manufacturer. The company says it factors the rating protocol into its design process.



**Why fit matters:** No federal standard dictates how a booster should position belts. The government's dynamic tests of crash performance don't measure what boosters are meant to do, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration only ranks boosters by how easy they are to use (see *Status Report*, Feb. 8, 2003, and Sept. 28, 2005; on the web at [iihs.org](http://iihs.org)). Manufacturers crash test boosters, but



## HOW BOOSTER SEATS RATE

### BEST BET

Britax Frontier 85 (combination highback)  
Chicco Keyfit Strada (dual highback)  
Clek Oobr (dual highback)  
Cosco Juvenile Pronto (dual highback)  
Cybex Solution X-Fix (highback)  
Eddie Bauer Auto Booster (dual highback)  
Evenflo Big Kid Amp (backless)  
Evenflo Maestro (combination highback)  
Graco TurboBooster Crawford (dual highback)  
Harmony Baby Armor (dual highback)  
Harmony Dreamtime (dual backless)  
Harmony Dreamtime (dual highback)  
Harmony Secure Comfort Deluxe (backless)  
Harmony Youth Booster Seat (backless)  
Maxi-Cosi Rodi XR (dual highback)  
Recaro ProBOOSTER (highback)  
Recaro ProSPORT (combination highback)  
Recaro Vivo (highback)  
Recaro Young Sport (combination highback)  
Safety 1st Boost Air Protect (dual highback)  
The First Years Pathway B570 (highback)

### GOOD BET

Britax Parkway SG (dual highback)  
Combi Kobuk Air Thru (dual backless)  
Combi Kobuk Air Thru (dual highback)  
Evenflo Symphony 65 (3-in-1 highback)  
Graco TurboBooster Sachi (dual highback)  
Graco TurboBooster Wander (dual highback)  
Maxi-Cosi Rodi (dual highback)

### NOT RECOMMENDED

Eddie Bauer Deluxe (combination highback)  
Eddie Bauer Deluxe 3-in-1 (highback)  
Evenflo Express (combination highback)  
Evenflo Generations 65 (combination highback)  
Evenflo Sightseer (highback)  
Harmony Baby Armor (dual backless)  
Safety 1st All-in-One (3-in-1 highback)  
Safety 1st Alpha Omega Elite (3-in-1 highback)

Note: 36 other boosters are in the middle range (see p. 6). They might fit some kids in some vehicles.

**How boosters are evaluated:** Institute engineers assess boosters using a crash test dummy representing an average-size 6 year-old. They measure how 3-point lap and shoulder belts fit the dummy in each of the boosters under 4 conditions spanning the range of belt configurations in a wide variety of vehicle types. A booster's overall rating is based on the range of scores for each measurement.

Boosters come in 2 main styles, highback and backless. Some highbacks are dual-use. Removing the back converts them to backless. These boosters get 2 ratings, one for each mode, because belt fit can differ by mode.

Highbacks have built-in guides to route shoulder and lap belts and can offer some support for the head. Backless models have lap belt guides, although parents might need to use a plastic clip to properly position the shoulder belts in many vehicles. Not all manufacturers provide  
(continues on p. 6)



## **NEED A BOOSTER? QUESTION STUMPS MANY PARENTS**

“Is she still supposed to be in a booster?”

“Tell us about the booster.”

“When do they switch?”

The child passenger safety questions arrived in a steady stream on a recent morning in Gaithersburg, Maryland. A moonbounce and a shiny red engine lured families to the fire department’s exhibit, where a row of child safety seats caught the eye of many grown-ups. Before the kids could pet the ponies or board the Tilt-a-Whirl, they first had to buckle up for a fit test in a demo seat.

This display at the Montgomery County Agricultural Fair also features information on restraints for infants and toddlers, but most questions concern belt-positioning boosters for older kids. Boosters seem simple enough. The idea is to raise a child so that vehicle lap and shoulder belts fit properly. But confusion about booster use persists, and surveys show that many children are leaving boosters behind before they get big enough. Adult belts generally don’t fit properly without a booster until a child is about 4’9” tall and weighs 80 pounds.

Despite increasing booster use, a 2008 survey by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that 45 percent of children 4 to 7 years old weren’t properly restrained in either a forward-facing child restraint or a booster. Though booster use may have increased since then, the survey is considered the most accurate measure because it determined restraint use by observation and obtained ages in interviews.

A January poll by the University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital found much higher rates of booster use, though such a result is expected when parents self-report. More important is that the survey confirms a broader trend — the older the child, the less likely he or she is to be riding in a booster or child restraint. Nearly all parents of 4 and 5 year-olds reported using boosters, but use declined to 82 percent for



6 year-olds, 67 percent for 7 year-olds, and down to 40 percent for 8 year-olds.

Every state and the District of Columbia has a child restraint law, but these differ when it comes to booster-age children. In 27 states and DC, the laws cover children until the 8th birthday, with exceptions for kids who are big for their ages. Wyoming and Tennessee require boosters to age 9 (go to [ihs.org/laws](http://ihs.org/laws)). The laws can be effective educational measures even when not well enforced.

“There’s a portion of the population that just follows laws. If it’s a law, it must be the right thing to do,” says Kristy Arbogast, who studies child passenger safety at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

Still, there’s room for confusion when it comes to older kids. Experts are quick to point out that many 9 and 10 year-olds are

small enough to benefit from boosters. Emilie Crown, who manages Montgomery County’s car seat program, says no matter how old kids are, “we always talk about proper fit.”

Karen Corkery knows Maryland’s law allows her 8-year-old daughter, Riley, to use a belt without a booster. But when the family encountered the car seat display at the county fair, she had questions, saying that Riley’s “sort of in that in-between stage. She just turned 8, and she’s been resisting the booster for the last six months.”

A fit test demonstrated that Riley is almost ready to leave the booster behind, but not quite. The belt fit her nicely, but her knees didn’t bend at the seat as they should.

“She’d probably be more comfortable in a booster,” Crown offered. Riley shook her head and made a face.

## **Q&A: USING A CHILD RESTRAINT IS KEY TO SAFETY IN CRASHES**

The number of children killed while riding in passenger vehicles has been cut in half since 1975, in large part thanks to better restraint use. Still, crashes are the leading cause of death among children older than 2. In 2008 crashes claimed the lives of 1,045 children younger than 13, including nearly 700 riding in passenger vehicles. Here are some key facts from a new Q&A about child passenger safety on the Institute's website.

**How effective are safety belts and child seats?** Any restraint is better than none at all, but an appropriate child seat provides the best protection in a crash until a child grows enough for adult safety belts to fit properly, usually about 4'9" tall and 80 pounds. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that restraint use saved the lives of 244 children younger than 5 riding in passenger vehicles in 2008. If all children younger than 5 had been in child seats, an additional 79 lives would have been saved.

**Do most children ride restrained?** Eighty-seven percent of children younger than age 8 rode restrained in 2008, but they weren't always secured in the proper restraints for their size and age. Seventy-nine percent of children who should have been in rear-facing restraints (younger than 1 or less than 20 pounds) actually were. The majority of children between 20 and 40 pounds were secured correctly, with 56 percent in forward-facing child restraints and an additional 5 percent in rear-facing seats. The others were in booster seats (21 percent), safety belts only (19 percent), or unrestrained (19 percent). Among 4 to 7 year-olds, 34 percent were prematurely using safety belts only instead of being properly restrained in booster seats. An additional 11 percent were unrestrained.

**Do child restraints need replacing after a crash?** It depends on the severity of the crash. Child restraints should be replaced any time there's damage such as cracked plastic, bent metal parts, or stretched belts, but damage like this doesn't occur in most crashes. There's almost never any reason to replace a child restraint after a crash of minor or even moderate severity. Inspect it carefully, and if there's no damage its performance in subsequent crashes shouldn't be affected.

For answers to 16 questions about child passenger safety, go to [iihs.org/research/qanda/child\\_passenger.html](http://iihs.org/research/qanda/child_passenger.html). For state-by-state information about child restraint laws, go to [iihs.org/laws/restraintoverview.aspx](http://iihs.org/laws/restraintoverview.aspx).



Resistance from children is one factor that reduces booster use. Some parents are too quick to give in, believing the risk is minimal, safety advocates say. Karen Gay, who runs passenger safety programs for the District of Columbia, says parents often acquiesce to children who complain the seats are babyish. Gay tries to win over kids by having them sit in a car without a booster and asking them to look out the window. Then she has them do it again with a booster.

"They say, 'Oh, I can see!'"

Gay often spots children sitting on boosters but not buckled in.

Parents say "I told her to buckle it," Gay says. "They're relying on the kids."

It's up to adults to take back control in this area, Gay and other advocates say. A National Highway Traffic Safety Administration study, published earlier this year on getting more children ages 5 to 7 properly restrained, concludes that more vigorous and better publicized enforcement of laws, combined with education campaigns, is needed. The study is based on discussions with child safety advocates and focus groups with adults observed driving with unrestrained kids.

"Identifying strategies to reduce the percentage of unrestrained young children" by L.E. Decina et al., is available at [nhtsa.gov](http://nhtsa.gov). Booster data from the University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital's national poll on children's health is available at [med.umich.edu/mott/ncph](http://med.umich.edu/mott/ncph).

### **GOOD BELT FIT**

Boosters elevate children so safety belts designed for adults will fit better. The lap belt should fit flat across a child's upper thighs, not soft abdomen. Good boosters (near right) have belt-routing features that hold lap belts down and forward. The shoulder belt should cross snugly over the middle of the shoulder, in position for effective protection in a crash.

### **POOR BELT FIT**

means the lap belt is too high on the abdomen (far right), and the shoulder belt is too close to the neck or off the shoulder.



## **BOOSTERS THAT MIGHT WORK FOR SOME KIDS IN SOME CARS**

- Britax Parkway SG (dual backless)
- Chicco Keyfit Strada (dual backless)
- Clek Olli (backless)
- Clek Oobr (dual backless)
- Clek Ozzi (backless)
- Cosco Ambassador (backless)
- Cosco Highback Booster (combination highback)
- Cosco Juvenile Pronto (dual backless)
- Eddie Bauer Auto Booster (dual backless)
- Evenflo Big Kid LX (dual backless)
- Evenflo Big Kid LX (dual highback)
- Evenflo Big Kid No Back Booster (backless)
- Graco Nautilus Elite Monti (combination backless)
- Graco Nautilus Elite Monti (combination highback)
- Graco Nautilus Matrix (dual backless)
- Graco Nautilus Matrix (dual highback)
- Graco No Back TurboBooster Cameo (backless)
- Graco TurboBooster Baker (backless)
- Graco TurboBooster Crawford (dual backless)
- Graco TurboBooster Sachi (dual backless)
- Graco TurboBooster Wander (dual backless)
- Maxi-Cosi Rodi (dual backless)
- Maxi-Cosi Rodi XR (dual backless)
- Safeguard Go Hybrid (combination backless)
- Safety 1st Boost Air Protect (dual backless)
- Safety 1st Summit (highback)
- Safety 1st Vantage (highback)
- Safety 1st Ventura (highback)
- Sunshine Kids Monterey (dual backless)
- Sunshine Kids Monterey (dual highback)
- The First Years Compass B505 (highback)
- The First Years Compass B510 (highback)
- The First Years Compass B530 (highback)
- The First Years Compass B540 (highback)
- Volvo Booster (dual backless)
- Volvo Booster (dual highback)

(continued from p. 3)  
clips. Even when they do, many of the clips don't ensure a good fit. Twelve of the highbacks are combination seats that can be used as front-facing restraints for toddlers and then as boosters as children grow. In booster mode, parents remove the built-in harness and use vehicle lap/shoulder belts to restrain kids.

Four highbacks are 3-in-1s. These are similar to combinations but also can be used as rear-facing restraints for infants. Forty-nine boosters are carryovers from the Institute's 2009 ratings because they still are in production. These include 7 *BEST BET* models, 5 *GOOD BET* boosters, and 6 that aren't recommended.

**Wider variety of seats to choose among:** New this year to the *BEST BET* ranks are seats by Chicco, Cybex, Graco, Harmony, and The First Years. These manufacturers join Britax, Clek, Combi, Dorel, Evenflo, and Recaro, which had *BEST BET* boosters in Institute evaluations last year and have models in the latest round.

"Parents looking for top-rated seats now have more choices that include several affordable picks," McCartt says. "Consumers don't have to spend much money on a booster to get good all-around belt fit. In fact, shoppers can find several *BEST BET* boosters for \$50 or less through online retailers."

The Institute's recommended boosters include a mix of highback and backless versions. Backless generally provides better lap belt fit, and older kids seem to favor this mode. Highbacks generally do a better job of positioning shoulder belts correctly in all vehicle setups. Either seat is fine as long as the belt fits right.

**Harmony improves:** It's clear that some manufacturers are taking the ratings to heart. Harmony Juvenile Products has 5 *BEST BET* boosters, more than any other manufacturer. One of them, the Harmony Secure Comfort Deluxe backless, wasn't recommended last year. The company modified it to eliminate the earlier problem with lap belt fit. Plus, the young Montreal-based company designed new seats to provide good all-around belt fit. Harmony's Dream-time is the only dual-use booster the Institute has evaluated to earn *BEST BET* in both modes, highback and backless.

Michael Noah, senior vice president of Harmony, says his company factored the Institute's protocol into its designs. Having clear US belt fit standards for boosters would benefit everyone, he says, since "good belt fit is the starting point for over-all car seat safety." Noah thinks standards should go beyond the required dynamic forward impact tests to include side and rear impacts, plus belt-routing.

Another Harmony seat, the Baby Armor, is a *BEST BET* when used as a highback but isn't recommended as a backless booster. In highback mode, the lap belt is where it should be — flat on the thighs. The backless problem is that once the thickly padded back is removed, the dummy sits farther back in the booster so the lap belt ends up too far forward on the legs.

Dorel Juvenile Group has 5 seats that rate either *BEST BET* or *GOOD BET*, including the new Safety 1st Boost Air Protect. The firm sells seats under the names Cosco, Dorel, Eddie Bauer, Maxi-Cosi, Safeguard, and Safety 1st. Dorel also makes 4 boosters the Institute doesn't recommend, down from 7 in the prior round of evaluations. All 4 are combination or 3-in-1 models. They don't work well as boosters because they don't do a good job of fitting the lap or shoulder belt.

What should parents do if a booster they already have isn't one the Institute recommends using? McCartt advises parents in this situation to take note of how the safety belts in their vehicle fit their child next time they're in the car.

"If the booster isn't doing a good job — if the lap belt is up on your son or daughter's tummy or if the shoulder belt is falling off your child's shoulder — then find a replacement booster seat as soon as practical, but you'll probably want to keep using the old one until then," McCartt says.

Almost all boosters improve belt fit compared with a vehicle's belts alone. Children tend to slouch and fidget, especially on long trips, so belts get out of position. Boosters help make belts more comfortable for kids and keep them upright and in position for the best protection.



## **TOP TETHERS ON CHILD RESTRAINTS ARE BEING USED LESS THAN HALF OF THE TIME IN FAMILY VEHICLES**

All front-facing child restraints have top tether straps to keep restraints from tipping too far forward in crashes, but parents often don't use them. An Institute survey shows tethers in use 43 percent of the time, about the same as in the mid-1970s.

Tethers are part of Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children, a system intended to make it easier to correctly secure child restraints. Lower attachments on the restraints connect to anchors in the vehicle seat. For child seats that face front, top tethers attach to anchors on a vehicle's rear shelf, seatback, floor, cargo area, or ceiling. Tethers also are meant to be used when safety belts secure child restraints. Untethered restraints can allow a child's upper body to move too far forward in a crash, risking facial and head injuries.

"Crash tests show that tethers help reduce the likelihood of head injuries in crashes, so it's disappointing that more parents don't use them," says Anne McCartt, Institute senior vice president for research. "Forward-facing seats that aren't tethered don't protect kids as well in crashes as seats that are properly tethered."

Technicians trained to correctly install and use child restraints examined more than 1,500 restraints in cars, minivans, pickups, and SUVs in parking lots in the Washington, DC, area in midsummer. Drivers of cars, minivans, and SUVs employed tethers at about the same rate, around 44 percent. Pickups were least likely to have child restraints. When they did, tethers were latched just 17 percent of the time.

The older the vehicle, the less likely tethers were used. Only 19 percent were being used in vehicles older than 2001, compared with 47 percent in 2001 and newer models. Nearly all forward-facing child restraints had tethers by 1999, though the corresponding anchors weren't required in passenger vehicles until 2001 models. Lower anchors weren't mandated until 2003. To work effectively, tethers should be tight, not loose, and 9 of 10 tethers surveyed were taut.

The overall findings are in line with prior Institute studies. In a 2003 survey in Maryland, researchers found a tether use rate of 47 percent. A 1974 survey indicated available tethers were being used only about half of the time (see *Status Report*, June 11, 2003, and May 12, 1975; on the web at [ihs.org](http://ihs.org)).

For a copy of "Observed use of tethers in forward-facing child restraint systems" by J.S. Jermakian et al., write: Publications, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 1005 N. Glebe Rd., Arlington, VA 22201.

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PEMCO Insurance  
Progressive Corporation  
Rockingham Group  
Safeco Insurance  
Samsung Fire & Marine Insurance Company  
SECURA Insurance  
Sentry Insurance  
Shelter Insurance  
Sompo Japan Insurance Company of America  
South Carolina Farm Bureau Mutual Insurance Company  
Southern Farm Bureau Casualty Insurance Company  
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