



Car Safety for Your Child with Autism

Children with autism may have additional needs that may affect travel. This brochure answers some questions you may have about safely transporting your child.

What should I do if my child gets out of her car seat, booster or seat belt?



Figure 1

- Pull your car off the road where it is safe and re-fasten the car seat harness or vehicle lap-and-shoulder belt. If possible, it may help to have an additional caregiver also sit in the back seat.
- Make sure the car seat fits your child correctly. Harness straps that are loose or at the incorrect height may make it easier to escape. The harness should fit snugly and without any slack. When forward-facing, the harness should be through the openings at or above your child's shoulders (*Figure 1*). Read the car seat instructions to make sure you are using the harness the correct way for your child.
- If your child opens the car seat's chest clip. You may need to trial other car seats that have different types of clips (*Figures 2 and 3*).



Figure 2



Figure 3

- If your child gets out of the booster seat or vehicle seat belt, try a car seat that can still be used with a harness. A harness (*Figure 1*) will hold your child better than a booster seat or vehicle seat belt. A car seat with a harness is harder to escape than a booster seat or a seat belt. Visit the website healthychildren.org for the American Academy of Pediatrics list of conventional car seats currently available.
- Other types of restraints, such as large medical seats or adaptive vests (*Figures 4 and 6*) might work better for your child. Adaptive restraints are usually ordered following a therapist evaluation through a local durable medical equipment vendor. Insurance coverage may cover the cost if medically necessary documentation is provided.

I've tried everything but my child consistently escapes her child restraint. What can I do?

- If your child consistently resists the use of a car seat, you may consider an adaptive car seat with anti-escape options that may help prevent your child from escaping the restraint.
- A few large medical seats and adaptive booster seats offer anti-escape options. These products have been crash-tested to be used with these specific large medical seats. For example, the Roosevelt adaptive car seat has the chest clip guard (*Figure 4*) and the buckle guard (*Figure 5*).
- Call the National Center for the Safe Transportation of Children with Special Health Care Needs at 800-543-6227 for details about adaptive restraints.



Figure 4

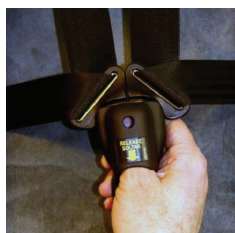


Figure 5

- The EZ-ON 303Z vest (*Figure 6*) with a rear zipper and optional vehicle floor mount tether (*Figure 7*) may help keep your child restrained in the vehicle. This vest must be used with a vehicle bucket or bench seat. The optional floor mounted anchor must be professionally installed in your vehicle.



Figure 6



Figure 7

- The EZ-ON MAX PV vest may also be an option for your child.
- If your child unbuckles the car seat's harness or chest clip, do not place anything over the harness unless it has been approved and crash-tested with that specific car seat, booster seat, adaptive restraint, or vest. After-market products are not safe to add without manufacturer approval.

My child likes stories. Do you have a story about car seats?

Create your own or ask your child's speech therapist to write a special social story for your child. The following story is an example:

RIDING IN THE CAR

When we go places, we ride in the car.

When we get in the car, we always have to keep our car seat buckled. Keeping the car seat buckled makes us safe.

When I keep my car seat buckled, I will get to play with my favorite toys. Maybe I will even get to pick the toy(s) that I want! Making good choices makes my mom and dad happy. When my mom and dad are

happy, this makes me happy.

Unbuckling my car seat or trying to get out of my car seat is not good.

When I do something that is not good, my mom and dad are sad. When my mom and dad are sad, this makes me sad.

It is better to be good in the car so that I get to do fun things. I need to remember to keep my car seat buckled every time I ride in the car.

Would a behavior plan help keep my child from getting out of the car seat or vehicle seat belt?

- **Yes.** Consistent use of a behavior plan may help prevent your child from escaping the car seat. Ask your behavioral psychologist, therapist, or physician to help you make a behavior plan you can follow every ride.

What should be in a behavior plan?

- **Teach your child what you expect when riding in the car**

Tell your child what the rules are when in the car. You may need to work with the speech therapist if your child has speech delays in order to communicate the behavior and reward. Take a photo with your phone to show your child what it is like to be buckled up correctly.

- **Praise and reward your child**

Praise your child for good behaviors and offer rewards your child likes. Give your child a reward such as a sticker for staying buckled up. At first, you may need to give your child more rewards, more often. For example, give a sticker every time you come to a stoplight or every minute the plan is followed. Gradually increase the amount of time between rewards until it is one reward for a entire trip (if possible).

- Let your child choose the reward earned by following the plan. You may need to use a picture board with choices that your child likes. Consider a special toy that can only be obtained in the vehicle, such as a soft book, soft toy, or music with favorite songs. Hard toys could be thrown or may hurt your child in a crash. If your child becomes bored the rewards/ toys, replace them with different ones.
- **Be consistent**
Make sure everyone who travels with your child uses the same behavior plan every time the child rides in the car. Follow the plan every trip.
- **Set Boundaries/Discipline**
Set limits for behaviors that are okay and not okay when riding in the car and stick to them. Praise and reward good behaviors immediately. Ignore behaviors that are not dangerous, or not going to injure your child or another.

My child is bothered by light touch and complains when in the car seat. What should I do?

Make sure the harness, vest, or seat belt is snug, flat, and not twisted against your child's body. Also, make sure the harness is touching your child's clothes and not skin. Tight fitting underclothes or a compression vest may help prevent irritating light touch.

What if my child moves a lot in the car during travel?

Talk to your child's Occupational Therapist about sensory diet activities. Make sure your child has a chance to move around throughout the day or before getting into the car. If possible, stop during your trip and let your child move. Calming activities may also help. Some children like to wear a compression vest which may be calming and decrease the sensory-seeking movement during travel.



Figure 8

What if my child screams with loud noises such as sirens?

Teach your child to cover ears or wear headphones (*Figure 8*) to block out loud sounds. Explain to your child the reason for loud sounds to help better understand where the sounds are coming from and/or why the sounds are occurring.

What if my child chews on the harness?

Lightweight chew toys and other oral sensory input may help your child stop chewing on clothes, harnesses, or car seat covers. You can purchase appropriate chew toys on-line or where adaptive items are available.

When can my child ride in the front seat?

The back seat is the safest place for all children 12 years and under, even if your car does not have an airbag.

How can I be sure my child is buckled up correctly?

Always read and follow the car seat instructions and your vehicle owner's manual. You can find a certified child passenger safety technician (CPST) who is trained in adaptive transportation (*Safe Travel for All Children* course) at cert.safekids.org. Click on "Find a Tech". In the CPST search form - choose your state, and make sure to click "Special Needs" in the Extra Training field. If there is not a CPST trained in adaptive transportation in your area, please call 800-543-6227 for further assistance.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:
National Center for the Safe Transportation of Children
with Special Health Care Needs
Indiana University School of Medicine
800-543-6227
preventinjury.medicine.iu.edu



SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

©2024 Do not reproduce without permission

This brochure was developed by the National Center for the Safe Transportation of Children with Special Health Care Needs and funded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the National Safety Council.

The views contained in this document are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Revised 02/29/2024