

# Making the Most of Your Child's Car Seat -Practical Tips to Help You Create Road Trip Bliss...

by Jennifer Fiander

Ah... becoming a new parent. The excitement of seeing your baby for the first time. Picking out a perfect name. Going shopping for all the cute little clothes. Selecting fun baby accessories. Yes, preparing for baby is an enjoyable and pleasant experience- that is, until coming to one of the most stressful purchase decisions you will ever make- the car seat.

**Why is choosing the car seat such a dilemma for so many parents?** Obviously we have the issue of safety, but there is also *functionality*, and personal preference with the '*look*' of the seat. Baby will spend a great deal of time in the car seat, and mom and dad want to make the most of their travelling experiences. The right car seat for baby and infant will pave the way for many, many years of blissful family road trips...

Of course, we 'seasoned parents' know this isn't the case, and that there are many tips and tricks to make it 'smooth driving' all ahead!

Believe it or not, many moons ago, there were cars and there were babies and children, but there were NO car seats designed for them. Mothers were handed over their babies and released from hospital, and mama gently cradled her swaddled baby in her arms, while father drove them home. This is a far cry from today's standards, where many hospitals have policies in place to not release newborns until they are checked to make sure they are properly strapped in and positioned 'just so'- strapped in so tightly that many nervous parents ease up the straps when out of the nurse's site.

Luckily for our children, safety standards have tightened up since those days. Where vehicle safety standards are in place, so are regulations for car seats. And for those of us who are 'car seat challenged' with installation, there are places to go to learn how to correctly position your car seat, whether it be an infant or booster seat. First and foremost, always check with your specific seat manufacturer, to see what weight/height they have determined to be correct for rear or front-facing installations. These may vary car seat to car seat and by manufacturer. Many of them have the information **labeled directly on** the car seat for your convenience! Secondly, you may use online resources to guide you through installation, such as your local public health website.

Many of us rely on other moms or dads giving us this information from their experience- *after all, they are experts, right?* The fact is, many parents who *think* they are installing their seats properly, are not. So, it is best to check with a trained professional, especially when safety is concerned. To find such a professional, call the birthing center of your hospital- they should be able to direct you to a clinic. You may also consider checking with your local police or fire department, as they often host car

safety clinics. And a note that many of us forget- use previously owned car seats with caution. If you don't know the history of the seat, it may have been involved in a car accident or have other unknown history. Although it may *appear* to be fine, it may have structural damage you can't see.

Aside from bundling our bambinos up so they are snugly and safe- there are other things we moms and dads need to consider! Do we want a seat that the child can continue to use after approximately one year of age? Do we want an infant seat that snaps into an easy-release base that stays in our vehicle? Do we want a seat that can come right out of the car and snap into a stroller, so we can easily move them without rousing them from their sleep, then conveniently push them around while we shop- avoiding the non-stroller alternative of trying to carry the seat by the handle while it **THUD-THUD-THUDS** with every footstep you take against your leg, leaving bruises and welts that make you look as though you've been under attack???

*(Hmm... wonder who didn't own the type that conveniently attached to a stroller...)*

So, you know where to go to get help installing your car seat correctly. And you're seriously considering the stroller option to avoid having to wear pants (to cover bruised legs) all summer. Now for the fun part- color options! While you still will mostly find the 'standard' color options of blues and greys, browns and beiges and greens, more and more color options are becoming available. Although the pink is pretty and girly and of course your toddler daughter will love it, consider that her younger brother may not want to be strapped into a fuchsia seat when he later graduates from his infant one.

Now your children are strapped in safely and ready for the drive- little Sally grinning ear to ear in her pink zebra print booster, and baby brother Joe blinded by the glare of his sister's seat. It's sure to be a smooth ride, *right?* Sure, till you get out of your driveway... Children are little balls of energy- they don't usually enjoy the restraint of being confined to a little chair for any period of time. A piece of advice- when it comes to car travel, a prepared parent is a happy parent. A little preparation for your travels (whether short or a long road trip), and you will be grateful you took the time, and saved some of your sanity!

Here are some great sanity-saving suggestions for building your 'vehicle toolboxes':

### **Vehicle Toolbox- for the KIDS:**

- **A cup holder.** If your child's booster seat doesn't have one or the vehicle doesn't have one within reach, consider purchasing one you can put in your vehicle. Not only can you place a drink in there (they can't whine when they are drinking!), but you can also store other little things in there to keep them busy.
- **A travel tray.** There are some really great travel trays out there- the trays typically go over the child's lap, creating a tray they can use to eat or to play, while remaining safely strapped in their car seats. Depending on what purpose you want it for (is it just for eating? will it remain there so they can do activities while you drive?), there are different styles available. Hard plastic

trays are ideal when needing a sturdy surface to eat a meal, while a soft tray may be preferred when driving (doesn't become an injury risk if you are in a collision). You can find these trays by doing a search online, or may be able to find them in your local store's baby department.

- **A busy box for the kids.** In a simple tote or container, put together a 'busy box' that only stays in the car. Include activity pages, books, toys... things that they would not find in the house, so that it is 'new' and 'fun' and keeps them busy while in the vehicle. Do not put anything in it that is a sharp- that could become dangerous in the event of an accident (opt for crayons instead of pencils).
- **Travel music.** Always have various types of music on-hand: upbeat music, classical music, etc. Try to find something YOU like also, so it doesn't: **a)** irritate you or **b)** put you to sleep.
- **Soft plush toys.**
- **Games-** (see games section for ideas)
- And for those of us who really want to 'cheat'- a **DVD player** and age-appropriate **movies**.

#### **Vehicle Toolbox- for the PARENTS:**

- **A stain removal kit.** Let's face it, we all say we won't let our kids eat in the car, but then convenience takes over and we let them. Your kit might contain: an old towel/rag, old toothbrush, small bottle of mild detergent, and a bottle of water. You might even consider a little hand-vacuum if you know you are going to have a particularly crumbly trip.
- **Wipes.** Handy little tools to have easily accessible. Use diaper wipes to quickly wipe off sticky, dirty little hands and faces.
- For instances where you might need to disinfect something but don't have access to soap and water, you might want to consider having a small bottle of **hand sanitizer** available (out of reach of kiddos of course!)
- If you have must be a bit neurotic and look to check on your child frequently, why not avoid swerving off the road by installing one of those handy little **baby mirrors**. You can even keep a close eye on your rear-facing infant without having to turn completely around to do so.
- Keeping your child well-entertained may keep your 'little Houdini' from trying to wiggle his or her way free. For a particularly slippery child, consider visiting your local store's car seat or baby safety department. They often carry **buckle-locking mechanisms** that are designed to be child resistant.

Yes, the whole 'car seat issue' is a big one for parents, and rightly it should be. After all, a considerable amount of your child's time will be spent in his or her seat. But with a little preparation and the right resources, you can make your travel time safe, and uneventful. You may find you even (*gasp*) enjoy the time spent with your children in the vehicle on a road trip!

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#### **BONUS: Suggested Travel Games**

**Travel Bingo-** Make a list of items you'd like your passengers to find while on the road trip. Make up little Bingo cards, with one item in each box (can have a PICTURE of the item for non-readers). You can vary the difficulty depending on the age of the child- (stop sign, cow, someone on a bike, the number 4, a post office, a man with a hat, etc.)

**Scavenger Hunt-** much like the Travel Bingo, except can be in list form, instead of the traditional Bingo card format. The object is to check off the items as you see them and see how many you can find.

**Count the...-** Choose an object and guess how many you will see in a certain amount of time (example- in 5 minutes). See how many stop signs you can count in that time, or how many light poles, how many cars with license plates with the letter K, etc.

**I Spy-** the traditional game of "I Spy", to be played between two or more passengers. Suggest you choose items IN the vehicle (outside is changing as you drive).

**A to Z-** for children old enough that know their letters and words that begin with them, go through the alphabet (alternating between people) to find something that begins with the letters. For instance: S-stop sign, T- truck, U- uniform. Older children can name things they see around them. When playing with younger children, have them simply name something that starts with that letter.

**ABC & 123 Find It-** give your child a piece of paper with the letters from A to Z and numbers 0-9 on it. The object is to find all the letters and numbers while on their travels. As they find one, they cross it off their list. They can only use one letter/number per sign. For instance, only one letter can be used from a S-T-O-P sign. Or only one number per house sign or license plate.

**Follow the Map-** if you know the exact route you are taking to your destination, draw out a basic map for your child to follow as you drive. Practice looking for landmarks (which you've also drawn on your map), discuss right and left turns, traffic lights, stop signs, etc.

**Puppet Show-** have a bin with puppets in it (purchased or homemade) that the children can play with. They can put on shows for each other, as their imaginations wish. To give some ideas, provide the children with scenarios they can act out.