Child Safety Seat Installation Resources:

- Visit one of Virginia’s Child Safety Seat Check Stations for free hands-on assistance from a Certified Child Passenger Safety Technician. Call 1-800-732-8333 or visit www.preventinjuriesva.com for a location near you.


- Income eligible families can apply for a free safety seat from as early as the third trimester of pregnancy through the Low Income Safety Seat Distribution and Education Program. Visit www.preventinjuriesva.com to learn how to apply.

- Visit www.preventinjuriesva.com to learn more information about child passenger safety and other tips for keeping your baby safe.

This brochure contains general guidelines for installing your child’s safety seat. For additional information regarding specific vehicles and safety seats, always refer to the instruction manuals for your vehicle and the child safety seat.

The first of many parental responsibilities is to make sure your baby's first ride home from the hospital is as safe as possible. There are three steps that all parents should take to make sure this happens:

1. Choose the right child safety seat for your baby.
2. Install the child safety seat correctly in your vehicle.
3. Secure your baby in the child safety seat correctly.

As simple as these steps may sound, it is easy to become overwhelmed. An average of 80% of child safety seats are installed or used incorrectly each year, leading to thousands of preventable injuries and deaths.

This guide will walk you through these three steps to make your baby’s **FIRST Ride a SAFE Ride!**
Did you know that infants are at a greater risk of serious injury or death in a car crash than children of any other age? This is because an infant’s body is not strong enough to protect itself from the powerful crash forces that occur in a car crash. An infant’s head is large and heavy. The neck bones, ligaments, and muscles are not developed enough to support the head. This makes an infant very susceptible to a serious brain or spinal cord injury.

Why a Rear-Facing Safety Seat?

The safest way for your infant to ride is rear-facing. A rear-facing child safety seat supports an infant’s head in the event of a crash to avoid trauma to the brain and spinal cord.

The latest guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children ride rear-facing as long as the safety seat will allow. The earliest a child should be turned around to face forward is when they are one year of age AND at least 20 pounds.

Step 1: Choose the Right Child Safety Seat for Your Baby

There are two types of child safety seats for infants:
1. Infant-only safety seat
2. Convertible safety seat in the rear-facing position

An infant-only safety seat fits an infant better, but the infant will often outgrow this type of safety seat before they are able to face forward. A convertible safety seat can be used from birth until the child transitions into a booster seat. Because these safety seats are larger, additional steps may need to be taken to ensure a secure fit for an infant.
Step 2: Install the Child Safety Seat Correctly in Your Vehicle

With so many different vehicles and safety seats available, no two safety seats are installed the same way. The following are some general installation guidelines. However, it is important to always read the vehicle owner’s manual and safety seat instruction manual to know how the safety seat should be installed.

Virginia Law (Code of Virginia Article 13 - § 46.2-1095) states that all rear-facing child safety seats must be placed in the back seat of a vehicle. If a vehicle does not have a back seat, the safety seat may be placed in the front passenger seat only if the vehicle is either not equipped with a passenger side airbag or the passenger side airbag has been deactivated. Putting a rear-facing safety seat in front of an airbag can result in death or serious injury.

Infants must ride sitting in a semi-reclined position. This position helps keep an infant’s head from falling forward and closing off their airway. This is especially important for infants under the age of six months with weak neck muscles. Each type of safety seat may have a different angle at which it should be positioned. Always refer to the safety seat instruction manual to identify the angle that the safety seat should be installed. Some safety seats have an adjustable base to help get the correct angle. However, depending on the vehicle seats, this may not be enough. A foam pool noodle can be used to get the correct angle. Refer to the safety seat owner’s manual to verify if both the noodle and the safety seat adjustment can be used at the same time.

FAQ: Should I turn my baby, his feet are pressed against the vehicle seat back?
No. Children should remain rear-facing as long as they are within the weight and height limits of the safety seat. A child whose feet are pressed against the vehicle seat back may obtain minor injuries in a crash such as a broken leg as compared to more serious head and spinal cord injuries if they are turned too early.

What if my baby is very small?
Premature and very small infants may need to ride in a special needs safety seat rather than a traditional safety seat. For more information, consult with your baby’s pediatrician.

Rear-facing Convertible Safety Seat

Convertible child safety seats can be used rear-facing and then forward-facing once the rear-facing weight and height limits are reached.

- Convertible safety seats will have two different sets of weight and height limits; one for rear-facing and one for forward-facing.
- Convertible safety seats usually have higher weight and height limits in the rear-facing position than infant-only safety seats. These safety seats can be used for very tall or large babies that still need to be rear-facing.

- Harness Slots
- Retainer Clip
- Harness Straps
- Buckle
- Harness Adjuster
Installing a safety seat too loosely is one of the most common and dangerous mistakes parents make. When installed correctly, the safety seat should not move more than one inch from side-to-side or front-to-back when pulled at the belt path of the safety seat.

There are two different ways to secure a safety seat in your vehicle: the vehicle seatbelts or the Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children (LATCH) system. Do not secure the safety seat using LATCH and the vehicle safety belt at the same time.

- The vehicle seat belt must be locked to ensure that the safety seat stays tight. Either a lap belt or a lap/shoulder belt combination can be used to secure the safety seat.
- The LATCH system allows you to install the safety seat to the vehicle using straps and hooks on the safety seat and anchor hardware in the vehicle instead of the vehicle seatbelt. Most rear-facing safety seats only use the lower anchors; however, there are some convertible safety seats that allow for the tether to be used in the rear-facing position.

Make sure to put weight on the safety seat as you install it to depress the air out of the vehicle seats. As you apply weight, pull the slack out of the LATCH straps or vehicle seat belt.

**FAQ**

Can I buy harness strap covers and a head support for my safety seat to keep my baby comfortable?

Do not use any accessories that did not come with the safety seat. This includes extra padding on the harness straps and head supports. These items were not crash tested with the seat and may interfere with keeping your baby safe in a crash.

Can I wrap my baby in a blanket in the safety seat to keep him warm?

Always buckle your baby in the seat first, then place blankets OVER the harness, never under the harness straps or between your baby and the safety seat. Do not dress your infant in bulky outerwear. It can interfere with getting a secure harness fit. Dress the baby in light clothing that keeps the legs free.

**Step 3: Secure Your Baby in the Child Safety Seat Correctly**

You may be nervous securing your baby snuggly in a safety seat because your baby is so tiny and curls his/her knees to his/her chest. But not securing your baby snuggly can result in death and serious injury if involved in a crash.

Harness straps hold your baby in the safety seat. The most common and safest type of harness is a five-point harness.

Use the bottom harness slots for a newborn infant. You will need to move to the higher harness slots as your baby grows. However, while rear-facing, the harness straps should always be in the slots at or below the baby's shoulders.

Keep harness straps snug and flat on baby’s shoulders, not arms. The harness straps are secure when you cannot pinch a fold in the harness material.

Most safety seats have a plastic harness retainer clip that should be level with the baby’s armpits. This clip helps to hold the harness straps on the shoulders.

If the safety seat did not come with a head support or your baby needs additional support to prevent his/her head from flopping to the side, place small, rolled blankets on each side of your baby’s shoulders and head to fill the empty space. Do not place the blanket behind your baby's head.

If your baby is pulling his/her legs up and out of the leg straps, a small rolled cloth or towel can be put between her/his legs behind the harness buckle.
Other Considerations

Has your safety seat been recalled?
Sometimes a defect shows up after a safety seat has been sold resulting in a recall. To be alerted if your safety seat has been recalled, register your contact information with the manufacturer. This can be done by mailing in the registration card that comes with the safety seat or on the manufacturer’s website. Visit www.preventinjuriesva.com or www.hsrc.unc.edu to find out if your child safety seat has been recalled.

Do you have a used safety seat?
New seats are best, but if you have a used child safety seat, keep the following in mind:

- Look for the manufacturing date on the seat label. Most manufacturers recommend seats not be used if they are more than 5 to 10 years old.
- Seats with obvious cracks, holes, dents, or missing parts are not safe to use.
- If you do not know its history, do not use a seat. It may have been in a crash.
- Do not use a seat without a manufacturer’s label. You need the label to check for seat recalls and determine the age of the seat.

Has your safety seat been involved in a crash?
If you were involved in a car crash with a child who was buckled into their safety seat, the seat may need to be replaced. The forces in a collision can sometimes cause unseen damage to a safety seat. This hidden damage may keep the safety seat from properly protecting the child in future crashes. Use the checklist at www.preventinjuries.com to determine if your safety seat needs to be replaced.

View the enclosed DVD to see a demonstration of the proper installation of a rear-facing child safety seat. This DVD allows for English or Spanish viewing.

Be sure to share this life-saving information with grandparents and other caregivers that may transport your baby.