

Car Seat Stages by Age

When to switch, and when to wait

Rear-facing infant seat · 0–12 months

Birth to ~30 lbs (check your seat's manual). Harness straps at or below shoulders. The 2-inch pinch test: webbing should not slack at the collarbone.

Rear-facing convertible · 1–4 years

Rear-facing until at least age 2 (AAP minimum) — ideally age 4 or until the seat's rear-facing weight/height max. Biomechanics strongly favor staying rear-facing as long as the seat allows.

Forward-facing with harness · 4–7 years

Only after baby outgrows the convertible's rear-facing limits. Top tether is non-negotiable — without it the seat rotates 4–6 inches forward in a crash.

Booster · 7–12 years

Until the 5-step test passes: back against vehicle seat, knees bend at the edge, lap belt low on hips, shoulder belt crosses collarbone (not neck), child can sit like this the whole ride.

Seatbelt only · ~12 years / 4'9"

State minimums vary but 4'9" tall and comfortable in the 5-step test are the universal go-signals.

Get it checked

NHTSA: 46% of car seats are installed incorrectly. Every major hospital, most fire stations, and many police departments have a free CPST (Child Passenger Safety Technician) who will check your install in 10 minutes.