



Right seat, wrong size

Have you got the correct child seat in your car? Thousands of parents haven't! We show you how to get on the right side of the new laws

Andrew Charman

TRAVELLING with children? Are you legal? Since a law change on 18 September, if you carry a child aged under 12 who is less than 135cm tall in your car, you must put them in a booster to raise them to a safer level to use an adult belt.

As a result, the child seat market has exploded, with a confusing variety of designs... so here's our guide to staying within the law and keeping your children safe. The Government believes the new rules could help prevent more

than 2,000 child injuries every year. But when Auto Express surveyed parents' response to the changes (Inside Story, Issue 935), the results were shocking.

Nearly half the children we checked in one location were travelling without a booster seat, with many parents complaining that retailers had simply sold out of suitable products.

While the law changes did seem to catch manufacturers on the hop, they are now getting their act together. A spokeswoman for Halfords, which sells a wide range of child seats, told Auto Express that stocks are high across all

price ranges. What's more, she said that staff are trained to advise parents on which product suits their needs best.

So, what are the options? There are many seats available, varying from only £10 to more than £200, but they fall into three basic varieties. Cheapest and simplest are the booster cushions, which do little more than raise the child passenger to a level where the adult seat-belt will fall correctly across the chest.

Full child seats adjust to suit older children, while most versatile are convertibles; these are full seats which can be split, leaving a booster cushion.

What the law says...

BASICALLY, any child under 12 and less than 135cm tall must use a booster seat. However, there are one or two exceptions to this rule. Taxis are exempt, while if you need to carry an extra child without warning – if you are giving your offspring's friend a lift home after their parent's car breaks down, for example – then you won't be expected to have a seat. If you carry three children and cannot physically fit three boosters across the back of your vehicle, the one in the centre can go without, too.

Far less publicised is the fact that placing a rear-facing baby carrier in the front seat has now been made illegal unless your car's passenger airbag has been de-activated – and this isn't a feature that all models offer. Ignoring the law carries the possibility of a £30 fixed penalty, and if you decide to take the case to court and lose, this can increase to a fine of up to £500.



The contacts

Britax 01264 386034
www.britax.co.uk
Graco 0870 909 0501
www.graco.com
iCandy
01462 484858
www.icandyuk.com

Little Shield 01462 484858
www.littleshield.com
Maxi-Cosi 020 8236 0707
www.maxi-cosi.com
Recaro 01926 484111 www.recaro.com
For info and advice, plus manufacturer contacts, log on to the www.childcarseats.org.uk website.

The products:

We check out 12 of the most popular booster, convertible and full child seats to help parents of all budgets take their pick...

Booster cushions

FOR parents working on the tightest of budgets, booster cushions are the simplest form of child seat. They are usually pieces of plastic, and are shaped, while padding is sometimes – although not always – included. Booster cushions have the effect of raising the child to a suitable level for wearing an adult seatbelt.

Little Shield £10-£13
 PAY a tenner and you can get Little Shield's cotton-covered booster, while leather look and sheepskin options cost a few pounds more. Made from polystyrene with a removable cover for washing, it's light, but less durable than rivals.



Graco Hi-Life £13
 SIMPLE and light, the Hi-Life is little more than a shaped plastic bolster with a padded cover secured by Velcro. There is no adjustability, and no guide strap for the adult seatbelt, but this product scores on its bargain price.



Britax Boost £25
 NOT enough cup-holders in your car? Then add a couple more with the Sprint from UK firm Britax. The armrests move and the cup-holders fold out from the corners. An adjustable strap secures the seatbelt over the child's chest.



Graco Booster £17
 A BIT more sophisticated, this is effectively the bottom half of Graco's convertible seats (below). The padded cover is held to the plastic cushion by elastic, and you get two-position armrests, a seatbelt guide and cup-holders.



Convertible seats

A COMBINATION of a booster and a full chair, convertible seats are the most versatile solution for parents. They're often the choice of people with younger children planning for more long-term transport needs, or those hoping to pass the seat down to a sibling when the eldest passes that 135cm milestone.

Graco Junior Plus/Logico Rallysport £50/£70
 GOOD value Junior Plus has a reclining backrest and moving padded head and armrests. Its base is identical to the Booster (above). Rallysport adds higher-quality covering.



Little Shield Watch Me Grow £46
 ANOTHER solution with a harness, so this suits nine-month-olds to 12-year-olds. It folds flat for easy storage and is padded for comfort, but lacks the adjustability of more expensive competitors.



iCandy £80
 TRULY versatile, this seat has a harness to fit children from nine months old. When they are too big, you remove the straps and seatback. There's a seven-position adjustable headrest, while the seat can be stowed flat in the boot.



Maxi-Cosi Rodi £95
 SCORES over rivals with its 'comfort base' – a curved plate that slips between the car seat cushion and backrest. This gives a more secure mounting. There's also a reclining backrest, as well as adjustable sides and headrest.



Full seats

THESE products are sometimes seen to have a limited timescale, with kids outgrowing them, but it's not necessarily the case – some provide safe accommodation for babies to near-teenagers. Yet while full seats offer probably the most protection, convincing an 11-year-old they need to sit in such a chair could be tricky!

Little Shield Traveller £50
 CHEAPEST of the full seats is for three to 12-year-olds. The headrest adjusts to six lengths, while the armrests flip to aid entry. Slide-out cup-holders are included, and the product folds in half when not in use.



Recaro Young Sport £150
 AS your child grows, you remove pieces of the Young Sport. First goes the seat insert, then the five-point harness at around four years old. This chair is for children over nine months, and has an adjustable back and headrest.



Britax Evolva 23/123 Ultra £65/£130
 OFFERED in a choice of eight colours, the 23 suits children aged 3-11 years old, while the costlier 123 gets a removable harness for those over nine months. In top Ultra form it has adjustable side supports.



Recaro Start £195
 IS this the Rolls-Royce of child seats? The Start even lets your offspring play their iPod through speakers in the headrest! It can't be adjusted, which is said to mean greater protection, and the aluminium frame absorbs impacts well.

