

have been slow to adopt modifications for child restraints in cars and persist in designing rear seats that are too big for many adults, let alone children. The rear seat of the average family car is too deep for almost half of adult women to sit

upright and comfortably bend their knees over the edge of the seat, and the seatbelt in the rear seat is unsafe for any person less than 145cm tall. Children do not reach this height until around 11 years old, on average. There are two main concerns

with being too small for an adult belt: the lap portion rides across the tummy, not the bony hips, causing abdominal injury in a crash, and the sash portion rides across the neck rather than the chest, causing injury to the neck and throat. Long seat cushions exacerbate these concerns by causing the child or small adult to slump so that their knees can bend at the edge of the seat, causing both parts of the seatbelt to 'ride up'.

two-to-five-years-old group and less than half the children in the five-to-eight-years-old group were appropriately restrained, the most common problem being that they were in adult seatbelts. Of the children in the eight-to-12-years group, more than half were using the adult seatbelt incorrectly by sitting with the sash portion under their arm or behind their back, effectively converting it into a lap-only belt. This Australian research reinforces the message of previous studies: child restraints work, but to work best, your child has to be in an optimally sized restraint and it must be fitted and used properly.

The Inertia To Change

It is frustrating for parents of children who are growing out of their 26kg booster seat to view online the dozens of seats that would take their child up to 36kg, but to be unable to order them from overseas. Why can't things change now to allow these seats onto the Australian market?

The road rules for booster seats require that an Australian Standards-approved restraint be used. The relevant Australian Standard only allows for booster seats for children up to 26kg to be sold.

Standards Australia is a non-governmental body, and cannot be instructed by governments to change the standard, which has traditionally been set by consensus between manufacturers, government and other interested parties.

Once the standard is changed, companies will not simply be allowed to import seats from overseas. The seats will need to be extensively tested to ensure that the Australian Standard is met – an expensive and time-consuming process. If the larger booster seats are allowed, we may then have to wait for the car-design standard to change so that the anchor points are tested for heavier loads.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has voiced concerns about the level of competition in the local booster-seat manufacturing market, with only three companies having almost the entire market share. With sluggish competition, it may take even longer for local manufacturers to bring new-generation seats onto the market.

All types of child restraint are aimed at improving this problem by providing better protection from the deceleration force of a head-on crash and the lateral force of a side impact. Research over the last 40 years strongly supports the use of infant capsules that face to the rear of the car until babies are at least six months of age, child restraints with inbuilt five or six-point harnesses until children reach at least five years of age, and booster seats that incorporate the adult lap/sash seatbelt and have back and side-wing protection until the child is 145cm tall.

So that is the science. But what do we do in practice? Two Australian studies suggest that we start off fairly well by using infant capsules appropriately, but we then let children rush through the next two stages and into adult belts far too early. A 2006 study by Dr Judith Charlton and colleagues at Monash University suggests that the average age an Australian child graduates to an adult seatbelt is about 5.6 years old, fully five years too early. Dr Zurynski and her colleagues at the APSU reviewed the cases of 48 children injured or killed in car crashes in Australia. Disturbingly, none of the children in the

With all the recent publicity over the issue and the proposed changes to the law, parents have been rushing out to get better restraints for their children – and finding that they are not available in Australia. While the research tells us to use forward-facing child seats with an inbuilt harness until a child is five years old, the maximum weight limit of such seats on the Australian market is only 18kg. Half of children reaching their fifth birthday will already weigh more than this, necessitating an early graduation to a booster seat before they are five years old. The situation is even worse when it comes to booster seats. The current maximum weight limit is 26kg for the largest booster seats available in Australia, the weight of an average eight year old. Overseas, there are many booster seats available for children up to 36kg, but it is illegal to import these into Australia as they do not comply with the relevant Australian Standard. Kate, a frustrated reader trying to find the best booster seat



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