

current trends in childhood weight, the figure is likely to be even higher, a concern noted by a report on booster-seat usage in the *Medical Journal of Australia* this year and bluntly summarised by one newspaper subeditor as "Australian kids too fat for their booster seats".

In Australia, we have muddled along for many years with a curious mix of incredibly slack laws but very exacting safety standards. As a result of the former, there has been little market pressure for car-seat manufacturers to provide the best available restraint systems. As a result of the latter, it seems that it will take some time to rectify things. The Australian Road Rules have recently been changed, and now require booster seats to be used up to a child's seventh birthday. These rules act as a guide for local legislation, which must now be amended in all the States and Territories before the new regime takes effect.

Before we can move on to the ultimate stage of optimal car restraints for children up to 145cm tall, at least one Australian design standard will need to be changed and new booster seats made and tested, followed by another round of changes to the road rules and local laws – so don't hold your breath.

In the meantime, our safety efforts are best directed at using the available restraints as effectively as possible. Here are some practical things you can do to reduce the risk of injury or death in the event of a crash:

- Do not let kids ride in the front seat. Children under 12 years are 40 per cent more likely to be injured in the front seat compared to the back.
- Early graduation from car restraints is not recommended. Currently, infants should be in a capsule until either they are heavier than 8kg or they are longer than 70cm. Then children should remain in a child seat until either they are heavier than 18kg or their eyes are higher than the level of the back of the chair. Then they should travel in a booster seat until they are either heavier than 26kg or their eyes are higher than the level of the back of the booster seat. Once they are large enough for an adult seatbelt (ideally about 145cm tall, although with current booster seats this will be about 128cm tall for the average 26kg child), do not let them ride with the sash portion behind their back or under one arm.

- Use booster seats that have a back and side wings rather than booster cushions. Booster seats are safer, particularly in side-impact collisions. Additionally, they have the advantage of maintaining a safer posture when children are asleep by limiting slouching or side movement of the head. However, in the case of a child who is between 128cm and 145cm tall, it might be worth considering having them sit in a moulded booster seat (with arm rests created by the moulding for the secure placement of the lap part of a seatbelt, but without the back and side wings) because one of these seats would at least boost the child's seated position to enable safer wearing of the adult seatbelt. But these smaller booster seats also have a weight limit of 26kg.
- Avoid the central lap-only seatbelt where possible. When used alone or with a booster seat, the lap-only belt is associated with higher rates of spinal and abdominal injuries.
- Ensure optimal fitting and adjustment of any capsule or seat. Make especially sure that the correct anchor points are used and that all straps are tight. A common mistake is incorrect threading of the adult seatbelts through booster seats.

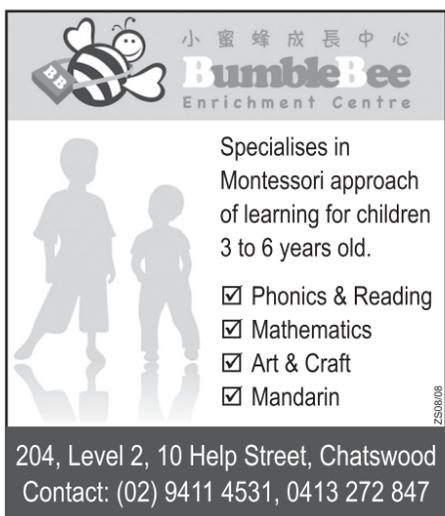
Finally, you need to regularly review the appropriateness of each type of seat for your growing child. Age limits are used in regulations as a necessary but inaccurate compromise – can you imagine a police officer by the side of the highway weighing or measuring a child? The height and weight of your child is far more important than their age in choosing the best restraint and when to graduate to the next size. ■

Sam Tormey is a doctor who writes on medical issues. His practice is in emergency medicine.

The Right Fit

It is strongly recommended that you use an approved fitting station each year to check whether or not you are installing the seat correctly and whether or not it is suitable for your child.

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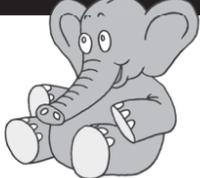
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