

Warning: Kids at Risk of Strangulation from Loose or Unused Belts

A 13-year-old died recently as a result of playing with a loose shoulder belt while riding in a car. Since 1998, more than 30 cases have been reported to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in which children had to be cut loose from vehicle belts they had wrapped around their necks or bodies.

All shoulder-lap belts have a retractor that holds the unused part of the belt and locks the belt in a crash or sudden stop. Normally, the belt rolls in and out of the retractor when the user moves. However, to improve installation of child safety seats, it is possible to lock belts in passenger seating locations for most cars made since 1996. This kind of belt can be dangerous if a child, unaware of the risk, locks it and then becomes entangled in the belt.

How to Protect Your Child from Loose or Unused Belts

If you install your child's safety seat using the shoulder-lap belt...	Follow installation instructions in the manuals for the child safety seat and the vehicle. After installation, make sure that the shoulder belt is either locked tight without slack or that it moves freely in and out and cannot be locked.
If you install your child's safety seat using the LATCH* connectors...	First, buckle the shoulder-lap belt, lock the retractor**, and remove the slack in the belt so it lies flat against the vehicle seat. Install the safety seat with LATCH connectors according to instructions. Some vehicle manufacturers state the unused belt should be released from the buckle after the safety seat is installed.
If your child can reach any unused shoulder-lap belt...	Buckle the belt, lock the retractor**, and remove the slack in the belt. You may need to buckle in a large stuffed animal or pillow to prevent the shoulder belt from retracting too far, allowing it to unlock.
If your child is riding in a booster seat...	The shoulder-lap belt must be snug against the child's body. Managing the belt is harder for younger children. Fortunately, there are many safety seats with a harness system that can be used up to 65 lbs. or more. If your child is in a booster, make sure he or she can keep the safety belt snug and correctly positioned.
In all cases...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never leave a child alone in the car. • Make sure all children are snugly harnessed. • Consider carrying a special belt cutter in the glove compartment in case of emergency.

*LATCH: Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children

**How to lock the retractor: Slowly and smoothly, without yanking, pull the shoulder belt all the way out. As the belt goes back into the retractor, a ratcheting (clicking) sound may be heard. The belt cannot be loosened without unbuckling the belt and letting most of it go back into the retractor.

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