

## SPECIAL SECTION SUMMER FUN

### Staying Safe on the Road



When summer hits, many families pack up the kids and hit the road. A family road trip is a great way to create lasting memories, but before loading up the minivan, parents must consider more than just how to keep the kiddos from fighting in the backseat. In fact, data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) consistently shows that car accidents are most frequent during summer months.

Fortunately, there are a number of simple yet very effective preventative measures parents can take to help ensure their

children's safety—and their own peace of mind—while cruising down Route 66. As a pediatrician, certified child passenger safety (CPS) technician, mother of three and author of *Heading Home With Your Newborn I* recommend the following tips to help families safely enjoy their time on the road.

- **Sit Safely.** Before taking to the road—whether it's to the grocery store or the next state—make sure you have a car seat that fits both your car and your child properly. I encourage families to test the seat in their car before purchasing it. Parents may also want to check with their vehicle manufacturer to see if a list of suggested car seat models is available for their specific car(s). Once you find a seat that fits both your car and your child appropriately, don't stop there. Step up your commitment by looking for additional safety features.

- **Keep them safe from all sides.** When choosing a car seat, I recommend investing in one that offers side impact protection. Twenty-five percent of all crashes are from the side, and these

crashes result in a significantly higher fatality rate than front or rear crashes. When a car is hit from the front, the car's hood and front seat combine to create a buffer between intruding objects and the child. Without that buffer in a side crash, however, very little stands between a child and the point of impact. While side airbags are designed to protect adults, they don't offer the same protection for children, and side impact testing is not yet part of the federal car seat standard. The good news, however, is that there are car seats that offer very valuable side impact protection. By looking for features such as deep side and head wings that are made out of energy-absorbent material and an adjustable head support to minimize lateral head movement in a crash, parents can help their children ride more safely. If you're unfamiliar with side impact protection, you can find very useful information on the Web site of car seat manufacturers such as Britax Child Safety in their dedicated Safety Center at [www.britaxusa.com](http://www.britaxusa.com).

- **Get a safety check.** It is estimated that at least 80 percent of all car seats are installed and used incorrectly. All parents should take the necessary precautions to make sure their car seat isn't one of them. There are several simple steps to take that help ensure proper installation and use. First, read your car seat and vehicle manual, and visit the car seat manufacturer's instructions or Web site for installation information and/or

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demos if you plan on installing your car seat yourself. Then have a certified CPS technician check your child's seat to make sure it's correctly installed. Visit NHTSA's Web site ([www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov)) for a list of child safety seat inspection stations and trained technicians by ZIP code.

• **Don't settle for the bare minimum.** Parents are often tempted to turn their kids forward-facing or graduate them to a booster seat as soon as they reach the bare minimum when it comes to weight limits. But we know that child seats with higher

weight limits for rear-facing and five-point harness use provide children with greater protection. In fact, there are now seats available that allow rear-facing use long past 20 pounds, and my own 58-pound 8-year-old sits in a Britax Frontier - a forward-facing combination seat that allows use of the seat's five-point harness all the way up to 80 pounds.

• **Tidy up.** Remember that anything that isn't secured in the car has potential to become a projectile in the event of a crash. Before even putting your car into gear, take a look around the inside to see if there are any loose objects present and safely store or secure them.

• **Say no to multitasking.** As parents, we're constantly busy doing many things at once. But when you're on the road, leave the multitasking at home. This means saving all phone conversations for when you're not behind the wheel. In fact, a recent report from the National Safety Council reinforced that hands-free cell phone use is just as distracting as chatting on a hand-held cell phone while driving. Similarly, if you need to hand your child food, or pick up a dropped toy or sippy cup, don't do it while driving—make yourself pull over and stop the car first.

• **Don't leave their side.** It's undeniable that a child is a parent's most precious cargo. That's why it's crucial to never leave children unattended in the car. Even in a locked car children are subjected to the dangers of rapidly rising temperatures, even on a mildly warm or sunny day, and can also accidentally bump a running car into gear with potentially disastrous results.

• **Teach them safety rules.** Before you travel anywhere, make sure you teach your child basic safety information, such as how to provide his full name, address, phone number(s) and what to do if you become separated.

By following these important steps to keep their children protected on the road, parents can spend less time worrying about their little ones' safety and more time enjoying their family time on the road.

*By Dr. Laura Jana, pediatrician, author, safety advocate and mother. As a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Section on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention she regularly reviews the latest scientific research and current developments on safety issues. Dr. Jana also has been a certified child passenger safety (CPS) technician and has focused her attention on raising awareness of the danger of side impact crashes.*

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