



Frequently Asked Questions

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I've heard lots of stories about how hard it is to install a child safety seat. How do I know if I'm doing it correctly?

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First, be sure to read both the child safety seat instruction booklet and the section in your vehicle owner's manual that describes how to install child safety seats. In general, a secure installation means that the child safety seat will not shift more than one inch from side-to-side or front-to-back when pulled at or near the vehicle belt path or path designated for the lower anchor straps. If you are still unsure whether you have properly installed your child's safety seat after reading both the safety seat and vehicle owner's manuals, or would feel better with a "second opinion," you can go to www.nhtsa.gov to locate a child seat inspection station or certified technician to help you.

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What is this LATCH thing I keep hearing about?

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LATCH is an acronym that stands for **L**ower **A**nchors and **T**ethers for **C**hildren. It was developed to help make it easier to install child safety seats. Basically, if you use the lower anchors of the LATCH system (required in almost all cars and on child safety seats since 2002) to install the child safety seat, you do not use the vehicle seat belts. LATCH generally consists of lower attachments on child safety seats and a set of tether anchors in the vehicle to hold the child safety seat in place.

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Where are the components of the LATCH system located in my car?

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There are two items in the vehicle that comprise the vehicle part of the LATCH system. First, there are a minimum of two "LATCH-equipped" seating positions in the rear of the vehicle; each has two small bars/anchors found in the space between the seat back and the seat cushion (the area is sometimes referred to as the seat bight). Second, there are a minimum of three anchors for the top tether straps. In sedans, these are usually located behind the vehicle's rear seat on the rear shelf. In some larger vehicles such as vans, pickup trucks, and SUVs, these anchor points may be found on the rear of a vehicle seat itself, on the floor, the roof, or other location. Be sure to carefully read your vehicle owner's manual to find out where they are in your particular vehicle and to avoid confusing them with other vehicle hardware such as luggage tie-downs.

**Q**

Where are the pieces of the LATCH system on my child's safety seat?

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Most United States child safety seats come with flexible lower attachments (with two hooks or push-button connectors), which are typically routed through the seat belt path, and a top tether strap. The top tether strap is located at the top rear of convertible child safety seats, forward-facing toddler seats, and combination seats. Most rear-facing infant seats do not have a top tether strap or hook as they do not generally use this equipment for installation. There are a few models of child safety seats that have rigid lower attachments. Unlike flexible lower anchor straps, which must be tightened to ensure a snug fit once connected to the vehicle's lower anchors, rigid lower attachments permit a snug fit immediately when they are attached and ratcheted onto the lower anchor bars in the vehicle.

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Can I pick and choose which parts of the LATCH system I use? I sometimes have trouble with the lower anchors, but the top tether anchor is easier for me.

A

The child safety seat instructions will explain when to use the top tether strap. For maximum protection, NHTSA recommends using a top tether with forward-facing child seats whether you decide to use the vehicle seat belt or the lower anchors to install your child's safety seat as long as it is permitted by both the child safety seat and vehicle manufacturers. The lower anchors or vehicle seat belt are designed to work along with the top tether to assure the highest level of security for child passengers restrained in forward-facing configurations. Also, rear-facing infant and rear-facing convertible child safety seats in the United States do not normally use the top tether anchor for installation. However, because installations vary widely from model to model, you must review your child safety seat instructions and your vehicle owner's manual carefully.

Check the instructions for specified weight limitations when installing the safety seat using the lower anchor connectors and top tether strap. Many child safety seat manufactures will establish maximum weight limits for using the lower attachments and top tether strap on your child's safety seat. Once your child's weight exceeds the established limits, you should stop using the lower attachments and possibly the upper tether strap from the vehicle and install the child safety seat using the vehicle seat belts. Many vehicle manufacturers also establish upper weight limits for the vehicle's LATCH system. Be sure to review your vehicle owner's manual to determine whether your child's weight is below the specified upper limits for lower anchors and top tether anchors in your vehicle. If it is not, use the vehicle seat belts to install your child's restraint.



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I am looking for a new safety seat and am overwhelmed by the number of choices. Is there a resource that I can turn to?

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NHTSA provides parents and caregivers with a five-star ratings system that allows you to evaluate how easy certain car seat features are to use before you buy a seat. While all seats rated by NHTSA meet Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards and strict crash performance standards, they do differ in their ease of use in four basic categories: clarity and consistency of instructions, vehicle installation features, clarity and consistency of labels, and securing the child. To access NHTSA's Ease-of-Use 5-Star Ratings, visit www.nhtsa.gov.

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Which is the best way to install my child's safety seat – using the vehicle seat belts or the LATCH system?

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Both provide equal protection as child safety seats must meet Federal safety standards with either installation method. The most important thing is to be sure that the child safety seat is correctly installed in your vehicle. Be sure to read both the child safety seat instructions and the section in the vehicle owner's manual on installing child safety seats.

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I've always heard it is safest to install child safety seats in the center rear seating position. My car doesn't have LATCH in the center seat. Can I use the lower anchors from the two seats closest to the window?

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The rear seat is generally the safest place for children of any age to ride. For proper installation of a child safety seat, it is imperative that the seat can be securely and snugly attached. Some vehicle manufacturers allow the inboard lower anchors from the seating positions nearest to the doors to be used to create a center rear LATCH seating position, but require that consumers check with the child safety seat manufacturer before doing so. Because the spacing between the inboard lower anchors in the outboard seating positions can be too great in some vehicles to ensure that your child's safety seat will be stable on the vehicle seat when installed in the center seating position using LATCH, you must review your vehicle owner's manual and your child safety seat instructions carefully to determine whether a rear center LATCH position can be created.

If you would like to place your child in a rear center position and no lower anchors are specifically designated for that position, or either the child safety seat or vehicle manufacturer does not permit the creation of a center rear LATCH position, you can install the child safety seat using the vehicle seat belt. If the child safety seat is installed forward-facing, it should be installed with the top tether, if available, as well. Installations should always follow both the vehicle owner's manual and the child safety seat manufacturer's instructions to ensure that the child safety seat is snugly and securely attached to the vehicle. If the vehicle does not have a top tether anchor, contact the vehicle manufacturer or dealership to see if it can be retrofitted.



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I'm confused about the weights for the LATCH system. Do I follow what the child safety seat instructions say? Or the vehicle owner's manual? Or both?

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The two lower anchor connectors and the top tether of the child restraint are designed to work together with the vehicle's lower anchors and top tether anchor to hold the child safety seat in place in the vehicle. You must review both your vehicle owner's manual and your child safety seat instructions carefully regarding the maximum allowable weight of a child when securing the child safety seat using LATCH. You must ensure that your child's weight is less than the maximum allowable weight recommended by the child safety seat manufacturer. If your child's weight exceeds the maximum allowable weight recommended by the vehicle manufacturer for LATCH installation, then the child seat should be installed using the vehicle seat belt and, if available, a top tether, still keeping in mind the vehicle owner's manual and the child safety seat manufacturer's instructions.

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Should I use both the seat belt and the lower anchors to be sure my child is extra protected?

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Securing the child safety seat by using either the lower anchors or the seat belt offers the same level of protection when used correctly and according to both the child safety seat instructions and the vehicle owner's manual. There is no evidence that the child is afforded additional protection when the lower anchors and the vehicle seat belt are used in conjunction with one another.

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I have a booster seat, but it doesn't have the LATCH straps on it. Is something wrong with it?

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Booster seats, which are used by children who have outgrown their forward-facing child safety seats, are designed to be used with lap-and-shoulder vehicle seat belts. Most booster seats on the market today do not come equipped with attachments for the vehicle's LATCH system. However, some newer boosters may use lower anchors to position the booster and to hold it in place for convenience, but this does not eliminate the need to also use a lap-and-shoulder vehicle seat belt to properly restrain your child. Booster seats are designed to raise a child passenger to the appropriate height for the seat belts to fit them safely and hold them securely. Only by using the booster seat in conjunction with the vehicle lap-and-shoulder belt can you be assured that your child is being afforded adequate protection.