
INSURANCE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY

NEWS RELEASE

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WITH OR WITHOUT AIRBAGS, CHILDREN ARE SAFER WHEN THEY RIDE RESTRAINED IN BACK, INSTITUTE STUDY SHOWS

ARLINGTON, VA — A new Institute study shows children are nearly always safer when they ride in the back seat — even if a vehicle doesn't have a passenger airbag.

Many studies have found rear seat child and adult passengers are safer than front seat passengers, but the Institute study is first to compare the effects of children's seating positions in vehicles with and without passenger airbags.

Using the federal government's Fatality Analysis Reporting System, researchers analyzed data on 26,233 children ages 12 and younger in vehicles involved in fatal crashes during 1988-95. Properly restrained children in rear seats had the lowest death rates. Sitting in back reduced children's fatality risk, whether or not they were restrained. That is, unrestrained children in rear seats had a 37 percent lower death risk than unrestrained children in the front. For restrained children, those in rear seats had a 38 percent lower death risk than restrained children in front. In vehicles without passenger airbags, rear seating cut the overall risk of fatal injury by 35 percent. For vehicles with a passenger airbag, rear seating cut the fatality risk by 53 percent.

Benefits of rear seating were even greater for restrained children in vehicles with passenger airbags. Young children restrained in child safety seats had an 80 percent lower risk of fatal injury. Those using a lap/shoulder belt had a 71 percent risk reduction.

"This study provides further evidence that parents and other care providers should be strongly encouraged to restrain infants and children in rear seats whether or not the vehicles are equipped with airbags," says Elisa Braver, an Institute senior researcher who authored the study. "Rear seat travel will reduce child passengers' risk of death in severe frontal collisions and rollovers, as well as eliminate injuries from deploying passenger airbags."

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The study also found that children were safer in back seats in a variety of crashes — frontal, rollover, and side impacts — with the exception of rear impacts. In rear impacts, children seated in back had a 61 percent higher risk of fatal injury than children in front.

Braver points out that relatively few fatal passenger car crashes are rear impacts — 5 percent. The most common fatal crashes are frontal impacts. These crashes account for 62 percent of fatal car collisions, and side impacts account for 25 percent.

“Both restraint use and seating position are critically important,” Braver says. For example, although riding restrained in the back seat is safer than riding restrained in front, it’s safer for children to ride restrained in front seats than unrestrained in back seats. Unrestrained children ages 5-12 seated in back had an 11 percent higher risk of death than children seated in front who were using lap/shoulder belts.

Institute researchers also examined injury risk based on where children sat in the back seat — in the center or the outboard positions. They found that children ages 0-12 in rear center seats had a 9 to 24 percent lower risk of fatal injury than children in rear outboard seats.