

INSURANCE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY

NEWS RELEASE

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LATCH SYSTEMS FOR CHILD RESTRAINTS AREN'T ALWAYS A SNAP; NOT EVERY CHILD RESTRAINT WILL WORK IN EVERY VEHICLE

ARLINGTON, VA — A federal rule requiring special attachments to anchor infant and child restraints in vehicles is making installation easier, but not all child restraints fit easily in all vehicles. This is the main finding of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's first review of the federal requirements.

The Institute's findings are being released at a joint news conference today with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and Consumers Union. NHTSA is unveiling ease-of-use ratings for child restraints.

The federal rule known as Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children, or LATCH, which became mandatory for new cars on September 1, 2002, is supposed to be simplifying the process of installing infant and child restraints. The goal is to increase the number of children who ride properly restrained. Automakers have to install special anchors in vehicles, and infant and child restraints have to be made with lower and upper attachments that mate with the anchors. Then parents should be more likely to latch restraints into cars correctly and with less effort.

"Installation generally was easier and less complex with LATCH-compliant systems than the old way of routing safety belts through child restraints to attach them to cars," says Susan Ferguson, Institute senior vice president for research. "Still, LATCH doesn't always make it a simple click-in operation to install a restraint. Before buying one, parents should be sure to try fitting it in the vehicle they plan to use it in because not every restraint is going to fit in every vehicle."

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Institute researchers attempted to install 6 different child restraints in 10 vehicles. The LATCH systems did make installation easier, but it wasn't a breeze. Not all restraints were easy to install in all vehicles. Some restraints in some vehicles were very difficult to install.

After conducting a photo survey of the anchor points in more than 50 new vehicles, the researchers selected 10 test vehicles, all 2003 models — Cadillac CTS, Chevrolet TrailBlazer, Chrysler Concorde, Dodge Grand Caravan, Ford Taurus, Honda Element, Hyundai Santa Fe, Lincoln Town Car, Pontiac Montana, and Toyota RAV4. These vehicles represent a wide variety of designs for accessing the anchor points for child restraints in back seats. Both the shapes of the vehicle seats and the placement of the anchors for securing the restraints contributed to the ease of access.

The easiest fits were in the TrailBlazer, Grand Caravan, and RAV4. In contrast, it was difficult to secure any of the six child restraints in the Santa Fe or CTS.

The lower anchors in some vehicles are visible, while in other cases they're recessed into vehicle seats. Visible anchors generally made installation easier, but not always. In the Ford Taurus, which has clearly visible anchors, the researchers had difficulty fitting two restraints because the position of the safety belt buckle impeded efforts to tighten the restraint straps.

In most cases, child restraints with rigid attachments were among the simplest to install and remove because they don't have any straps to tighten. On the other hand, researchers weren't able to install either of the two restraints with rigid attachments in the Hyundai Santa Fe. The geometry of this vehicle's back seat was such that researchers couldn't line up the attachments on the restraints with the anchors buried deep in the vehicle seat, and the inflexibility of the attachments left little room for maneuvering.

Researchers couldn't install one of the two child restraints with rigid attachments in the Cadillac CTS, either.

Removal of child restraints also could be difficult. The release buttons on restraints with rigid and C-hook attachments made them easy to remove. Releasing the flexible hook required depressing it and then rotating it when the anchor was buried in the vehicle seat.

Other problems were associated with top tethers, which are designed to prevent excessive forward movement of forward-facing child restraints during crashes. Especially in SUVs and minivans, these could be hard to use. Anchors for tethers weren't always clearly marked. Sometimes the anchor points were on the backs of vehicle seats, which had to be folded down before a tether could be installed. In some cases, a head restraint had to be removed to accommodate a tether.

Ferguson says "parents need to read two manuals, the one that comes with the restraint and the vehicle owner's manual, to make installation go more smoothly, particularly when it comes to top tethers. But even this won't guarantee success because the manuals aren't always helpful. For example, some don't say what to do when a seatback or head restraint gets in the way."

**End 3-page release on child restraints
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