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DESPITE NEW CALIFORNIA LAW, NO NEED TO REPLACE CHILD SEATS AFTER MOST CRASHES

A question that has been around a long time involves how to determine whether child restraints and/or safety belts should be replaced after crashes. A California law that will take effect in January 2000 addresses the issue of child restraints by requiring insurers to cover the cost of replacing any restraint used by a child after any crash, regardless of severity. This legislation isn't based on objective evidence about the subsequent performance of child restraints after crashes. In fact, available evidence points to the durability of child restraints, even after impacts of moderate severity.

Child restraints should be replaced anytime there's damage such as cracks in the plastic, bending of the metal parts, or stretched or elongated belts, but such damage doesn't occur in most crashes. A Canadian study involved repeated tests of several child restraints in high-speed crashes. In most cases, there was no damage to the restraints despite the repeated impacts. This test program is continuing.

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety crash tests also are relevant. Four tests into a rigid barrier were performed at 35 mph with a dummy representing a one-year-old child in a rear-facing infant restraint. In one test the restraint, placed in the front seat, was struck by the deploying passenger airbag. However, no damage to the seat was visible after this test or after three additional tests with the same restraint positioned in the rear seat. There was minor stretching and tearing of the restraint's safety harness, but the dummy was effectively restrained in all four tests.

During hearings on the California law, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said it has no position on this issue of replacing child restraints after crashes.

The bottom line is that there's almost never any reason to replace a child restraint after a crash of minor or even moderate severity. Only in more serious crashes should potential damage be a concern. After a crash, a child restraint should be inspected carefully, and if there's no damage its performance in subsequent crashes shouldn't be affected.

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