

New law requires children under age 8 to be in child safety seat

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Colorado expanded its child passenger safety law beginning Sunday, Aug. 1 requiring all children under age 8 to be properly protected in a child safety seat when traveling in a motor vehicle. The change means thousands of 6 and 7-year-olds across the state will have to begin riding in booster seats if they are not already doing so. Previously, the law required only 4 and 5-year-olds to be in boosters.

“The state has taken a big step forward in protecting kids from serious crash injuries that result from wearing seat belts that were simply not designed to protect small bodies,” said Col. James Wolfenbarger, chief of the Colorado State Patrol. “Many parents mistakenly believe that a seat belt is enough to protect their older child in a crash, but we know booster seats are a safer option because they lift the child up and position the seat belt safely across them.”

Children ages 4-7 who use booster seats are 45 percent less likely to be injured in a crash compared children who are restrained only by seat belts. In Colorado from 2004 through 2008, 28 children ages 4-7 were killed in traffic crashes. Twenty of them were improperly restrained, totally unrestrained or using only the vehicle seat belt.

“It is important that we give children an opportunity for a brighter future by giving them the best odds of surviving a crash and avoiding serious injuries,” said Dr. Todd Porter of Safe Kids Denver Metro. “For children who have outgrown a car seat, a booster seat is the next best thing to truly protect them. It literally lifts the child up so the lap belt rests across hip bones to protect internal organs, and it positions the shoulder strap so it rests across the collar bone instead of on the neck or falling off the shoulder.”

In addition to expanding the use of booster seats, the revised law gives parents more flexibility in choosing the best safety seat for their child or baby, as long as they adhere to the upper weight and height limits set by the seat’s manufacturer and follow installation instructions. However, the law does set the following minimum requirements:

—Babies under 1 year old and less than 20 pounds must ride in a rear-facing car seat and only in the back seat of the vehicle.

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—Once babies turn 1 year old and weigh at least 20 pounds, the law gives them the option of using a front-facing car seat. Rear-facing car seats are still allowed by law and safety experts recommend parents continue using them to the upper weight limit allowed by the car seat manufacturer because it provides the most protection.

—Children ages 4, 5, 6 and 7 must continue to be protected in a child safety restraint. For most kids in this age group that means a booster seat, but experts recommend that children remain in a forward-facing car seat longer if the upper weight limit of the seat allows it (usually 40-50 pounds).

—When a child turns 8, the law allows them to use a vehicle seat belt. But for the best protection, safety experts recommend kids continue to use a booster seat until they are at least 4 feet 9 inches tall, which half of children will not reach until they are 11 years old.

The minimum fine is \$82 per violation. All child passenger safety violations are primary enforcement. There is a one-year education period for booster seat violations only.

To assist parents in determining the best child safety seat for their child and to make sure it is installed properly, there is a network of more than 140 “fitting stations” across the state as part of Child Passenger Safety Team Colorado. Most of the fit stations offer free assistance for parents, including car seat checks to make sure seats are installed properly. For parents facing financial hardship, some fit stations provide car seats at a reduced price or for a small donation. Parents can find a fit station closest to them by visiting www.carseatscolorado.com or calling toll free 1-877-LUV-TOTS or 303-239-4625 in Metro Denver.

Over the next several weeks, CPS Team Colorado, Safe Kids Colorado and safety advocates across the state will host special events to provide more information about booster seats and the expanded law. Some of the events will include an opportunity for kids to “bling” their booster by decorating and customizing it.

“Your child’s safety should not be negotiable, but it doesn’t have to be a battle either,” said Selena Silva of The Children’s Hospital. “We suggest parents include booster-age kids in the process by allowing them to help pick out their booster and even decorate it. Let them know the booster is for their safety and point out benefits like a better view out the window!”

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