

Booster: It's the law

Tough Md. rules on restraining children as old as age 7 in cars take effect Monday

By Josh Mitchell and Kelly Brewington | Sun reporters
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As a child, Mary Canaan spent family road trips crammed with four siblings in the back seat of her parents' old Monte Carlo. No one used seat belts.

And child safety seats? Practically unheard of.

"I remember we used to put a piece of luggage in the back seat and that's what I used to sit on," said Canaan, of Pasadena, who now makes sure that her young grandchildren are always buckled up.

Starting Monday, Maryland will enforce one of the strictest child-passenger safety laws in the country, requiring children as old as 7 to be fastened in booster seats while riding in cars. The current state law requires children 5 and under to be in a child safety seat.

State officials are launching an awareness campaign today, starting with a demonstration of car seats at a media gathering in Rockville.

More and more states are mandating car seats and boosters for children old enough to be in grade school. Eighteen states currently require safety seats for children up to 7.

Child-safety advocates point to research showing that the seats drastically reduce child deaths and injuries resulting from automobile crashes, the leading cause of death among children over age 3.

There's nothing more important that a parent can do today than to make sure their children are properly buckled up in their car," said **Del. William A. Bronrott**, a Montgomery County Democrat who pushed for the new law. He likened requiring child safety seats to administering a cure for a disease: "Not to apply that medicine or prescription for health or safety is, in effect, malpractice."

Not all people favor such laws. Critics say they represent a government intrusion on parenting.

"Parents know what's best for their children, and I think the state is trying to usurp their authority," said state Sen. [Janet Greenip](#), an Anne Arundel County Republican who voted against the measure.

Car safety seats, which cost about \$30, range from rear-facing and forward-facing seats for infants and toddlers, to booster seats designed for older children.

Maryland for years has required safety seats for children younger than age 4, and since 2003, for children younger than 6.

The new law, which the General Assembly passed overwhelmingly this year, will require safety seats for children who have not reached their eighth birthday. It exempts children who are 4 feet 9 inches tall or weigh 65 pounds. Violators will face a \$25 fine.

Advocates say the devices save lives. "They are incredibly effective, and there's a lot of research on the issue," said **Jackie Gillan**, vice president of the Washington-based **Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety**.

She pointed to research by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia showing that the use of a safety seat, which is strapped into a vehicle, reduces a child's risk of injury by 59 percent.

Maryland has seen a drop in the number of children injured in car crashes since it began requiring safety seats for 4- and 5-year-olds in 2003.

In 2006, the last year for which statistics were available, 827 children were injured and four were killed in vehicle crashes, according to the State Highway Administration. That is down from 1,069 injuries and six deaths in 2002. State officials say other factors may have contributed to the decrease.

Parents generally favor stronger child passenger safety measures, surveys show.

In the parking lot of the [Maryland Zoo](#) yesterday, parents moving their kids in and out of car safety seats voiced support

Gavin Bayne of Dundalk said that he and his wife, Jennifer, recently bought a safety seat that will accommodate their 20-month-old son, Quillan, for years to come.

"We've already discussed keeping him in the car seat for as long as possible," Bayne said.

But some parents said that while they support the law, they wonder if American society has become too cautious.

"Living overseas, you see that Americans are more cautious with everything," said Jacque Seybold, who recently returned to Cockeysville after two years living in

Bangalore, India, with her three children and her husband, who was sent there by his employer, [IBM](#).

"We're the only ones with antibacterial wipes and worried all the time about germs. In India, the only people we saw with car seats were Americans. ... You do need to be careful, but sometimes I worry we go a bit overboard."

Seybold said she supports the new law, drives safely and ensures that her children buckle up. After leaving the zoo yesterday, her 4-year-old son George dutifully climbed into his car seat while enjoying a lollipop.

Seybold wonders, however, how older children will adapt to booster seats.

"My middle child is 9, and if I told her to sit in a car seat at 8, she'd say that's a little embarrassing," Seybold said. "But if that's the law, it's the law."

According to guidelines issued by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, children who outgrow their forward-facing seats - usually at about 4 and 40 pounds - should ride in booster seats. The agency says seat belts fit properly when they lie across the upper thighs and the shoulder belt fits across the chest. That's generally when children may use adult seat belts.

As she placed her 7-month-old daughter, Megan, into a pink-and-brown car seat, Amanda Vogel, 23, of Essex said child-safety seats can be a hassle because of the space they take up but, "It's worth it."

"It keeps them a bit higher, away from the strap. Plus, I can see them better," Vogel said.

But her 6-year-old nephew Gage Flanery was adamantly opposed to having to ride in a booster seat. "I'm a big man," he said, chewing on a chocolate chip cookie. "Car seats are for babies.""

"He says everything is for babies," Vogel said, exasperated. "He always wants to sit up front. But no way."

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