

Safekids Issues Paper: Child Carseat Restraints

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Prepared for: Hon. Mark Goshe, Minister of Transport

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Subject: Review of Child Restraint Rules scheduled for 2002

Motor vehicle traffic crashes are a significant child injury problem

In the period 1986-1995, at least at least 27% of infants who died in motor vehicle crashes in New Zealand were unrestrained. Motor vehicle traffic incidents were the leading cause of death in children aged one to 14 years of age (Source: Injury Prevention Research Unit).

Child restraints are a known effective injury prevention intervention

The use and correct use of child carseats are known to be highly effective in reducing the probability of a fatality or injury in the event of a crash (Source: U.S National Highway Transportation Safety Authority).

Child restraint use and incorrect use in New Zealand

Child car seat use in motor vehicles has been compulsory in New Zealand since 1994, yet an observational survey undertaken by the Land Transport Safety Authority (LTSA) in 2000 found that, regionally, compliance was as low as 68%.

Recent research suggests, however, that observational studies may not identify "incorrect" use of child car seats. Incorrect use is of concern because it may nullify restraint effectiveness. Levels of incorrect use, ranging from 30%-80%, have been reported for other industrialised nations.

A recent Otago University Injury Prevention Research Unit (IPRU) pilot study has revealed high rates of incorrect use of child car seats in Dunedin and identified several barriers to using them correctly. The research found that about 75 % of those in the study (n= 207 drivers) were using them incorrectly. The most serious errors commonly made were the non-use of tether (top) straps and the failure to secure harness strap ends.

Barriers to effective restraint use

Another pilot study by the IPRU involving eight in-depth focus group interviews with users of child carseats found that there were three main types of barriers to child carseat use:

1. A lack of authoritative information. This refers to confusion amongst users about which is the best product to use, and that there was "too much choice", which made it difficult to identify which product was best. It also meant that the information available about how to use carseats was confusing and conflicting because not all of it was applicable for their situation.
2. Ergonomic design. This refers to a very long list of design issues, which make carseats hard to use correctly.
3. Socio-economic issues. These refer to the cost of renting or purchasing carseats and social and parenting attitudes towards use.

Recommendations

- 1) Short-term action: Restrict the list of approved carseats to those that meet only the Australian/New Zealand Standard 1754 Standard. This will enable the development of consistent “authoritative” information to be made available by a range of organisations to users about how to correctly use carseats. It is also likely to reduce the range of carseat products on the market, making it easier for consumers to identify the product most appropriate for their situation.

In the longer-term, consider adopting the new United States Federal Motor Vehicle child restraint and safety standards, which came into force in September 1 1999, which introduce engineering solutions that will reduce by 50% the major design barriers to carseat use. All new American vehicles are required to have anchor points for tether straps fully installed and fixed bars in the back seat. Effectively, all you have to do is to plug the child car seat into specially-designed holes in the back seat. This does away with the need for using adult seat belts and locking clips. No belts would be needed except for the top tether strap. Australian, Canadian and European Union regulatory authorities are currently seriously considering introducing very similar vehicle design requirements.