

Selecting and Demonstrating Booster Seats for Media and Public Awareness Campaigns

Stephanie M. Tombrello, LCSW, Executive Director
SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.

January 7, 2002

Many interviewers come to their task with preconceived ideas of the characteristics of boosters which can cause them to misinterpret for the public. The person being interviewed should introduce the concepts of the different types of boosters early in the conversation to save time and avoid the simplistic questions of price and style by directing the interviewer to more important factors to consider.

First, it is important to remind interviewers that the use of boosters requires that the vehicles have shoulder and lap belts in the back seat. For older vehicles without shoulder belts, there will be more information later.

Backless boosters are designed to position vehicle belts correctly on the child and fit the contours of vehicle seats. This style is most appropriate for the changing social behavior to be established for elementary school children. It is light, portable, and even fits in a backpack. Several models are available for less than \$25. It can be taken to school by a child with an after-school “play date” or in a carry-on bag on an airplane. Backless boosters usually position both the shoulder and lap portions of the belt correctly, crossing the center of the shoulder and touching the chest and the tops of the thighs. The shoulder belt adjuster strap/clip may be used, if necessary. The child leans against the vehicle seat back at a comfortable angle.

Some boosters have a removable back; the back should be used only if the vehicle seat is too low to support the head (up to the child’s ears). This type is ideal for use in a wide range of vehicles. It provides head support without the possible problems associated with most highback boosters.

Highbacks are the most common type of booster and, unfortunately, perceived to be the best. Avoid using this type for a publicity photo or demonstration. If a highback must be used, do not use the comfort clip on the side of the seat unless necessary to keep the shoulder belt from scraping the neck or face.

Change to a different model if you observe any of these common problems with the highback booster:

- Lap belt not touching child’s thighs due to high sides of booster
- Lap belt too high (near the waist instead of touching the thighs)
- Shoulder belt not touching the chest due to deep side wings
- Comfort clip grips shoulder belt, preventing retractor from removing slack after child bends forward or wiggles

You may choose to demonstrate a booster made of lightweight foam, which is lighter and easier to carry than the ones made of plastic. If a reporter expresses concern that this type is not sturdy enough to protect a child, point out that the purpose of the booster is to properly position the child in the vehicle belts, not to restrain the child.

Most of the “highback boosters” sold in retail stores are actually combination seats. This type is used as a safety seat with harness up to about 40 lbs. The harness is removed when the child outgrows it, and the seat becomes a belt-positioning booster. The advantage of this type of seat is that it may fit from 20-30 lbs. up to 80 lbs. However, most models do not position the lap or shoulder belt as well as a backless booster. Also, the child may have to be closely supervised because the comfort clip grips the shoulder belt so the webbing cannot retract the extra slack after the child bends forward.

For those whose vehicles were designed with lap belts only in the back seat (i.e. pre-1989 to 1991 vehicles), there are a number of options. Recognizing the limited availability of products appropriate for these situations, California and Oregon laws permit children over 40 lbs. to ride in such vehicles wearing just a vehicle lap belt. However, it is recommended that all occupants be provided with upper body restraint (shoulder belt or harness straps). It may be possible to retrofit the vehicle with manufacturer-made shoulder belts. A listing of those vehicles for which such kits were designed is available.

Products for older children that can be used without shoulder belts:

The Britax Laptop is an energy absorber for children 30-65 lbs. and can be used with a lap belt alone. Britax (888/427-4829) also manufactures the Super Elite, a safety seat with full harness which is certified to 80 lbs. (tether required from 50 lbs. up). E-Z-On Products (800/323-6598) produces the E-Z-On Vest with sizes from age 2 to adult (tether required). For children over 4, E-Z-On makes the Y-Harness (tether required).

#639 (1/7/02)