

Kids at Risk from Belt Entanglement

Warning from an article in the *Sacramento Bee*, March 20, 2005

“Safety experts nationwide are concerned about a possible unexpected and dangerous side effect of a new car seat anchoring system called ‘LATCH’ after learning that a Rancho Murrieta child was nearly strangled by a seat belt while riding in her car seat.”

Your child may be at risk of possible strangulation...

- 1) if your child’s safety seat is attached using the LATCH connectors instead of the lap-shoulder belt AND
- 2) if, when snugly harnessed in a safety seat, your child can reach the unused lap-shoulder belt OR an adjacent, unused lap-shoulder belt
AND ESPECIALLY
- 3) if the safety belt has a retractor* that locks if the belt is pulled all the way out.

SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. recommends that you take some simple steps to protect your child.

If any unused belt is within reach of a small child, buckle it and, if possible, lock it.

If you use LATCH:

- 1) Buckle the lap-shoulder belt (without the safety seat).
- 2) Pull out the shoulder belt slowly, all the way to the end, without yanking. If the retractor is lockable, this will prevent the belt from being pulled out by the child.
- 3) Feed the excess belt back into the retractor.
- 4) Install the safety seat with LATCH, according to instructions provided by the vehicle and safety seat manufacturers. Make sure the lap-shoulder belt is behind the safety seat. If the buckled belt interferes with ease of reaching LATCH connectors or buckling in adjacent safety seats, unbuckle the unused belt AFTER the safety seat is tightly installed.

Excerpts from the *Sacramento Bee* article

“On March 8, 3-year-old Kaitlin Sipes of Rancho Murrieta was nearly killed by one of those unoccupied seat belts...To her [mother’s] horror, she saw that the right rear lap-shoulder belt was wrapped around her daughter's neck. The more the child struggled, the more the seat belt ratcheted and tightened.

The child survived and is fine, but her experience has prompted several pediatric and passenger safety experts to recommend that parents consider locking seat belts behind car seats when using LATCH to deter children from playing with loose belts.

‘I’m afraid we didn’t expect this,’ said Stephanie Tombrello, who heads SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A., a national nonprofit in Altadena dedicated to child passenger safety. ‘LATCH is so new, not many kids have been exposed to it yet. But this obviously is a major problem and needs to be addressed immediately.’ ”

*All lap-shoulder belts have a retractor that holds the unused part of the belt and locks on the belt in a crash or sudden stop. Normally, the belt rolls in and out of the retractor when the passenger moves. Some retractors can be locked by pulling the belt all the way out. As the belt goes back into the retractor, a ratcheting (clicking) sound can be heard. The belt gets tighter and tighter; it cannot be loosened without unbuckling the belt. If the retractor is not lockable, it is still recommended to put the belt behind the safety seat and buckle it.

Update for 2007: Reports of similar experiences have been reported for children up to 9 years old!

SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. P.O. Box 553, Altadena, CA 91003 www.carseat.org 310/222-6860, 800/745-SAFE (English) 310/222-6862, 800/747-SANO (Spanish)

This document was developed by SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. and may be reproduced in its entirety.
Important: Call to check if there is a more recent version before reproducing this document.