

## How Long Should Children Ride Facing the Back of the Car?

According to a 2008 article in the professional journal *Pediatrics*, children under age two are 75% less likely to be killed or suffer severe injuries in a crash if they are riding rear facing rather than forward facing. In fact, for children 1–2 years of age, **facing the rear is five times safer.**

If a baby is riding in an infant–only seat (the type that usually has a handle and detachable base) it should be replaced with a rear–facing convertible seat before the baby reaches the maximum weight specified (22–35 pounds) or if the top of the head is within an inch of the top edge of the seat. Most babies outgrow the typical infant–only seat before they are one year old, but they are not ready for a forward–facing seat. New convertible seats available today allow children to remain rear facing until they weigh 30–45 pounds, depending on the model.

Babies have heavy heads and fragile necks. In a crash, an infant’s soft spinal column can stretch, leading to spinal cord damage if he is riding facing forward. The baby could die or be paralyzed permanently. This is true even for babies who have strong neck muscles and good head control. The neck bones are flexible, and the ligaments are loose to allow for growth.

If the baby is facing forward in a frontal crash, which is the most common and most severe type, the body is held back by the straps — but the head is not. The head is thrust forward, stretching the neck and the easily injured spinal cord. Older children in forward–facing safety seats or safety belts may end up with temporary neck injuries or fractures that will heal. But a baby’s neck bones actually separate during a crash, which can allow the spinal cord to be ripped apart. Picture what happens if someone yanks an electrical plug out of a socket by the cord, causing the wires to break.

In contrast, when a child rides facing rearward, the whole body — head, neck, and torso — is cradled by the back of the safety seat in a frontal crash. Riding in a rear–facing safety seat also protects the child better in other types of crashes, particularly side impacts, which are extremely dangerous, if not quite so common.

Children in Sweden ride rear facing until they are three to five years old, lowering traffic death and injury rates substantially. Although most safety seats sold in the U.S. are not designed to be used rear facing as long as those in Sweden, safety experts recommend that children ride rear facing as long as possible, at least until they are two years old.

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