

Braced for safety

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THE demand for child restraints has increased significantly in the Illawarra as parents become more aware of the dangers of securing young children with seatbelts.

This month the Mercury told the stories of Isabelle Broadhead and Toni Perry - both aged three - who died from injuries sustained by their seatbelts.

Isabelle was killed last April when the car in which she was travelling swerved to avoid a truck on Cordeaux Rd, Mt Kembla. Toni died almost seven years earlier when her car collided with another vehicle at a roundabout on the Princes Hwy in Bomaderry.

Isabelle was sitting in a booster seat while Toni was wearing only a seatbelt.

Since their stories appeared in the Mercury, stores have reported increased sales in harnesses and booster seats.

Babyco's Marina Markovski said the store had sold out of the Safe and Sound safety harness last week.

"There was an over-demand and people were calling up to make inquiries to see what alternatives there were to booster seats," she said.

Baby Zone manager Tony Moschella said inquiries about safety harnesses had increased by more than 50 per cent.

"People have been coming in asking about the booster seats. They just want to make sure a similar accident doesn't happen to their children," he said.

Babies Galore manager Narelle Badger said there had been a dramatic increase in the sale of booster seats equipped with harnesses, with foam booster seats sold out.

"Parents are now more aware. We have always recommended the safest seat, but in the past not many people bought it. There has definitely been an increase," she said.

Isabelle's father Noel Broadhead said while he was glad the safety message was reaching parents, more families needed to be educated about car safety.

Prince of Wales Hospital senior researcher Julie Brown co-authored a 2005 study into seatbelt safety. She found that correctly restrained children had a minimal risk of injury in the event of an accident.

She said children should graduate to a booster seat only when their shoulders were too big to fit into a forward facing child seat. They should then remain in a booster seat until they grew out of it.

"In an accident a seatbelt is designed to apply the loads to the pelvis and the shoulder bone. For children, if it doesn't fit, there is a risk that the forces will be applied to the soft parts of the body like the belly and the neck," she said.

"If a child is sitting in a booster and they slump to the side, it is very easy for them to fall out of their belt, or for the belt to slip off their shoulder."

Moves are underway to change legislation that allows children over 12 months to be restrained with an adult seatbelt.