

Why seatbelt laws are failing our children

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Date: 04/03/2007
Words: 1037

Publication: The Sunday Age
Section: News
Page: 6

The law allows parents to choose a 'suitable restraint' for children over 12 months old travelling in a car. This is not good enough, say medical experts. Renee Switzer reports

PARENTS are risking their children's lives by putting them in ill-fitting car seats and allowing them to use adult seatbelts before their bodies are ready.

Under existing laws, children older than 12 months can travel in a motor vehicle with only an adult seatbelt as a restraint.

This is despite extensive research showing that children under the age of four who graduate to a booster seat with an adult belt are substantially increasing their risk of serious injury.

Legislation is under review, but it could be more than a year before any changes are made.

Royal Children's Hospital trauma director Joe Cramer said he was seeing a number of seatbelt injuries in young children.

"The majority of seatbelt injuries we see are related to the lap part of the seatbelt or where children are a bit young to be placed in the (adult) sash seatbelt," he said.

Dr Cramer said adult seatbelts could cause severe spinal, bowel and abdominal injuries.

He said the legislation was inappropriate and believes children should not use adult seatbelts until they are at least 10.

In the past five years 86 children aged up to 14 have been admitted to Victorian

emergency departments with seatbelt injuries, according to the Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit.

Of the 52 patients under the age of eight who presented to the Royal Children's Hospital in the past seven years with major trauma injuries, 75 per cent were wearing an adult seatbelt and had a lower torso injury. Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC) last year surveyed 700 parents from Victoria and NSW and found that more than half of the children aged 4-11 were not in the appropriate restraint for their size.

Senior researcher Dr Judith Charlton said children aged five to 10 - the booster-seat age group - were over-represented in serious crash figures.

TAC figures show that in the past five years, 37 children aged between 5 and 15 were killed as passengers on Victorian roads, compared with 15 children aged four and younger.

Serious injury data from January 2001 to November 2005 revealed 776 children aged between 5 and 15 were seriously injured, compared with 182 children aged four and younger.

The Monash research found that only 25 per cent of children aged between 4 and 11 used booster seats - the rest travelled with only adult seatbelts.

Dr Charlton said more definitive Australian laws on restraint use for older children were needed, along with an extensive educational strategy.

The Australian Road Rules Maintenance Group has appointed a consultant to work with road safety experts to review the legislation.

Suggested changes will be released for public comment this month by the National Transport Commission, which chairs the group.

National Transport Commission spokesman Paul Sullivan said there was widespread recognition that the legislation needed to be changed so children older than 12 months were lawfully required to be adequately restrained.

The legislation does not specify what type of restraint should be used for children over 12 months, instead allowing parents to choose a "suitable approved child restraint" or "a seatbelt properly adjusted".

"People's interpretation of 'properly restrained' may be different and so whether that means a booster seat and a seatbelt is not clear in the road rules," Mr Sullivan said.

Mr Sullivan said the recommended national position would be considered by Transport Ministers later this year.

The Australian Paediatric Surveillance Unit is currently researching seatbelt-related deaths and injuries.

Assistant director Dr Yvonne Zurynski was critical of the current legislation but said it was just as important that parents were educated about the risks.

"It would be great to get the legislation changed sooner but even before any legislative change, we could be increasing awareness among parents and caregivers about the dangers of early graduation to adult seatbelts in order to prevent injuries," she said.

"There's no law beyond 12 months so it's perfectly legal to restrain an 18-month-old in an adult seatbelt, which is just ridiculous. Most parents are sensible enough not to do that; however, once children become a little bit older parents tend to relax and think, 'Oh well, Johnny's a big boy now he can go into an adult belt when he's four or five', and that's not the optimum way of restraining kids."

Dr Zurynski said young children restrained by adult seatbelts were sustaining "quite horrific injuries", with children under nine most affected. "A colleague of ours using crash test

dummies has found kids shouldn't be graduating to an adult seatbelt until they're 145 centimetres tall, which is around age 10 or 11," Dr Zurynski said.

A Prince of Wales Medical Research Institute senior researcher, Julie Brown, co-wrote a 2005 study of seatbelt safety. She found that correctly restrained children had minimal risk of injury in the event of an accident.

Her study of child occupants being admitted to hospital in NSW after crashes found 80 per cent of children aged 2 to 8 were inappropriately restrained.

She believes more specific legislation would help parents protect their children.

"I think parents need very clear guidance so they're less likely to make mistakes because parents that we speak to want to do the right thing but just don't know what the right thing is."

However, she said there was a problem with children fitting into Australian Standard car seats. "There's a slight mismatch in the way the standard designates the types of restraint by weight and the actual age of children. The standard needs to be modified to allow booster seats to be made that will carry children that are larger."

A tragic road to safety education

DANIELLE BROADHEAD learnt the danger of ill-fitting car seats the hardest way.

Her three-year-old daughter, Isabelle, was killed last year after the vehicle they were in swerved to miss a truck on the wrong side of the road and hit a tree. Ms Broadhead had been travelling only about 40 km/h, but the blunt-force trauma to Isabelle's stomach, caused by her seatbelt, killed her. She had been strapped into an Australian Standard booster seat and fitted the weight and height requirement. "Every week that goes by that they don't change the law, parents don't know (what the best restraint is) and children will be put at risk," Ms Broadhead said.