



SHOPPING SMART

The Family Fit & Car Seat Checklist

Bring the car seats, the stroller, and the kids. Test the vehicle the way your family will actually use it.

A NOTE FROM OUR TEAM

A brochure can't tell you whether three car seats fit across a row or whether your stroller fits behind the third row. Only a real test fit can. We've watched families find out the hard way after signing. Take this checklist to the lot and find out before you buy.

— The Auto Advocate Team

Families rarely regret the color or the sound system. They regret the second-row seat that won't tilt with a car seat installed, the stroller that only fits if the third row is folded, and the middle seat with no lower anchors. Every one of those is easy to discover in twenty minutes on the lot, and expensive to discover after you sign.

1 Know the Basics Before You Go

NHTSA's car seat guidance shapes what your vehicle needs to hold. Select a seat by your child's age and size, make sure it fits your vehicle, and use it every time.

STAGE	NHTSA GUIDANCE	WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE VEHICLE
Rear-facing	Under age 1: always rear-facing. Ages 1–3: rear-facing as long as possible.	Front-seat room with a rear-facing seat behind it
Forward-facing	Harness and tether once the rear-facing seat is outgrown. Always use the tether.	A top tether anchor at every seat you'll use
Booster	Once the harness is outgrown, still in the back seat, until the belt fits.	Belt buckles reachable and not buried
Seat belt	Lap belt across upper thighs, shoulder belt across shoulder and chest, not neck.	Rear belts that fit your child's height
Back seat	Children under 13 ride in the back seat.	Enough rear seats for every child

NEVER

NHTSA is clear: **a rear-facing car seat should never be placed in front of an active air bag.** If your plan only works with a child up front, it's the wrong vehicle for your family.

2 What to Bring to the Lot

- ☐ Every car seat and booster you currently use
- ☐ Your next-stage seat if you'll need it soon
- ☐ Both car seat manuals (or have them on your phone)
- ☐ The stroller, folded the way you fold it
- ☐ The kids, if you can (they'll tell you about comfort)
- ☐ The tallest adult who rides in back
- ☐ Your Must-Have list from No. 07
- ☐ Extra time. A real test fit takes 20 to 30 minutes

FROM THE INSIDE

A good salesperson will happily wait while you install car seats. A store in a hurry may say, "Oh, they all fit." Fit depends on the exact seat, vehicle, and seating position. Say, "We'd love to, but we need to install them first," and do it. A store that won't give you the time is telling you something.

3 Test Fit Every Seating Position

Install each seat where it will actually ride. Mark ✓ or × for each position you plan to use.

POSITION	LOWER ANCHORS	TOP TETHER	INSTALLS TIGHT	FRONT SEAT OK	NOTES
2nd row, driver side					
2nd row, middle					
2nd row, passenger side					
3rd row, driver side					
3rd row, middle					
3rd row, passenger side					

"Installs tight" = passes your car seat manual's tightness check. "Front seat OK" = the person in front still fits comfortably.

4 The Lower Anchor (LATCH) Check

IIHS research on real-world installations found lower anchors were more likely to be used correctly when they sat **shallow in the seat crease**, had **plenty of room around them**, and **took little force to attach**. IIHS also rates LATCH ease of use by vehicle.

- ☐ I can see or easily feel the lower anchors
- ☐ Manual checked: can the middle seat use lower anchors?
- ☐ Anchors aren't buried deep between the cushions
- ☐ I know my seat's lower-anchor weight limit
- ☐ The connector clips on without fighting the seat
- ☐ Third-row positions have tether anchors (if needed)
- ☐ Tether anchors are easy to find and clearly marked

TWO NHTSA RULES WORTH KNOWING

- Lower anchors or seat belt, never both. Install with one or the other.
- Lower anchors have a weight limit: 65 lbs total, minus the weight of the car seat itself. Past that, install with the seat belt.

5 Third-Row Access, With Car Seats In

- ☐ Second-row seat tilts or slides forward with a car seat installed
- ☐ An adult can climb in and out without gymnastics
- ☐ Or: captain's chairs leave a walkway to the third row
- ☐ Third row has belts that fit, head restraints, and vents
- ☐ An older child can get to the third row alone
- ☐ Third row folds and raises easily, by one person

6 Cargo: The Stroller Test

TEST	VEHICLE A	VEHICLE B	VEHICLE C
Stroller fits behind the third row with the third row up	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
Stroller + a week of groceries fits	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
Shortest adult can reach and close the open liftgate	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
Load floor is low enough to lift the stroller in easily	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N

7 Everyday Family Features

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Rear door child locks that are easy to set | ☐ Rear-seat reminder alert |
| ☐ Driver can lock out rear windows | ☐ Seat materials that wipe clean |
| ☐ Rear climate vents reach car seat positions | ☐ Charging ports for rear passengers |
| ☐ Sliding doors or wide-opening rear doors | ☐ Rear camera / parking sensors for busy driveways |

8 Shopping for a Teen Driver

If this vehicle is for a new driver, or will become theirs later, IIHS offers four principles for choosing a safer vehicle for teens:

- 1 Skip the high horsepower.** IIHS research found high-horsepower vehicles are more likely to exceed the speed limit. Stick with the base engine.
- 2 Go bigger and heavier.** Bigger, heavier vehicles provide more protection in a crash. IIHS's recommended teen lists are midsize cars or larger.
- 3 Require electronic stability control.** IIHS reports ESC cuts the risk of a fatal single-vehicle crash roughly in half.
- 4 Get the best safety ratings you can afford.** Look up IIHS and NHTSA ratings for the exact model year, and compare them with No. 08, The Vehicle Comparison Scorecard.

9 After You Buy

- 1 Read the car seat section of your new owner's manual.** It shows exactly which positions have lower anchors and tethers, and any rules for the middle seat.
- 2 Get the installation checked.** Certified Child Passenger Safety Technicians will inspect it, in most cases free of charge, according to NHTSA. Some locations offer virtual checks.
- 3 Register every car seat with its manufacturer** so you receive recall and safety notices. You can also sign up for NHTSA recall alerts.
- 4 Re-check as kids grow.** Each move to a new stage (rear-facing, forward-facing, booster, belt) is a new install, and a new chance to get it right.

FINAL FAMILY FIT SIGN-OFF

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Every child's seat installed tightly in its real position | ☐ The stroller fits with every seat in use |
| ☐ No rear-facing seat in front of an active air bag | ☐ Every driver is comfortable and can see out |
| ☐ The third row is reachable with seats installed | ☐ Our Must-Haves from No. 07 are all covered |

FOUND THE ONE THAT FITS?

Now let us line up the vehicle, the people, and the paperwork.

Once your family fit test picks the winner, Walk-In Ready does the legwork: we locate the exact unit, research rebates and incentivized rates, defend your trade value, and tell you who to ask for, what to say, and which documents to bring. You book the visit and walk in prepared.

Walk-In Ready \$399

(405) 761-3390 • autoadvocacy.net
THE DEALERSHIP HAS EXPERTS. NOW YOU DO, TOO.

SOURCES

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), Car Seats and Booster Seats: nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/car-seats-and-booster-seats

NHTSA, Air Bags (children and air bag safety): nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/air-bags

NHTSA, 5-Star Safety Ratings: nhtsa.gov/ratings

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), Vehicle characteristics associated with LATCH use and correct use in real-world child restraint installations: iihs.org/topics/bibliography/ref/2068

IIHS, About our tests (LATCH ease-of-use ratings): iihs.org/ratings/about-our-tests

IIHS, IIHS used car lists help families choose safer, larger vehicles for teens (Nov. 2018): iihs.org/news/detail

This checklist is educational, not medical or safety-certification advice. Always follow your car seat manual and your vehicle owner's manual, and have your installation checked by a certified Child Passenger Safety Technician.