

Keeping Kids Warm When It's Cold Outside

Cold weather brings new challenges for child passenger safety. While car seats and seat belts are very effective at protecting children in crashes, anything bulky under the harness straps or behind the child may increase the child's risk of injury in a crash. Although a child may seem secure all bundled up in the car seat, these thick layers make it very hard to get the harness tight enough to protect the child in a crash.

“Is this jacket okay to wear in the car seat?”

If you wonder if your child's jacket is okay to wear in the car seat, try this simple test* to find out:

- Put the jacket on the child.
- Buckle the child into the car seat.
- Tighten the harness straps until they pass the pinch test.**
- Unbuckle, but do not loosen, the harness straps.
- Remove the jacket from the child.
- Buckle the child into the car seat, but do not tighten the harness.
- Check the harness for proper fit. Can you pinch any excess webbing in the harness? If you can, the jacket allows too much slack and is not a safe option for staying warm in the car seat.

**The same test can be used for checking snowsuits or buntings as well.*

*** The 2010 National Child Passenger Safety Certification Training Program Student Manual (Chapters 9 and 10) states that a pinch test—trying to pinch excess harness webbing at the shoulder—should be used to check harness tightness.*

Tips and tricks for jackets in car seats

When cold weather requires heavy jackets or clothing, suggest these options:

- **Wear a jacket backwards.** The National CPS certification student manual (Chapter 10) suggests this technique for safe jacket use in car seats: Take off the jacket at the car, and buckle in the child. After the chest clip is positioned and the harness pulled snug, put the jacket on the child backwards (if there is a hood, tuck it down inside), and tuck the edges behind the child's arms. This method lets the child remove the jacket if he or she gets too warm.
- **Zip around the straps.** Place the child in the car seat while he or she is wearing the jacket. Open the front of the jacket, pull it out of the way on both sides, and position and buckle the straps and chest clip. Once the harness is tight, zip or snap the jacket closed over the harness straps. It will be hard for the child to adjust the jacket, so pay attention to how warm he or she gets in the car.

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- **Cover with a bathrobe or poncho.** A warm bathrobe, wearable blanket (a blanket with sleeves), or poncho (a blanket with a hole for the head) can be used to safely cover a properly restrained child in a car seat. After the child is buckled in with the chest clip positioned and the harness pulled snug, cover the child up and tuck in the sides. Using this method lets the child move or remove the cover if he or she gets too warm.
- Bulky child warmers designed to line the car seat under the child are potentially unsafe and should only be used if allowed by the car seat manufacturer.

Especially for babies

- First, buckle the baby into the car seat, position the chest clip, and pull the harness snug. Then, cover the baby's body with a blanket and tuck the edges in behind baby's arms and legs (This is the closest thing to swaddling that can be done safely in the car seat).
- Babies can have trouble breathing if there is padding behind their heads. Hats that are thick or too big, bulky clothes, and hoods that are not pulled up on the child's head are all potential threats to a baby's airway. Hoods should be put on baby's head in such a way that they don't keep the head from lying against the back of the car seat. Keeping the baby's chin off of his or her chest is the best way to keep the airway clear.

Do's and Don'ts of keeping kids warm in the car:

DO

- Warm up the car before putting the child in, when possible.
- Dress the child in a reasonable amount of warm clothing (well-fitting and no thicker than polar fleece).
- Put a hat or hood, gloves, and socks on the child.
- Put a blanket, jacket, or poncho on the child over the harness straps after the straps are buckled and tightened.

DON'T

- Dress the child in snowsuits, buntings, or other bulky clothing.
- Put blankets, buntings, or other warm car seat liners/ covers behind the child's back or head.
- Let the child wear thick, puffy jackets under the harness straps.
- Use heating pads or other heat sources between the child's body and the car seat.

Resources:

The 2010 National Child Passenger Safety Certification Training Program Student Manual, Chapter 10. Alisa Baer, MD. The Car Seat Lady. Articles in Archive, Jan. 2011. thecarseatlady.wordpress.com/2011/01/

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