

Is YOUR child safe?

What was supposed to be a convenience for parents turned into a deadly weapon for a Pennsylvania infant. When the minivan 4-month-old Jocelyn* was riding in was struck in an accident, the adjustable handle of her Evenflo infant carrier shifted just as her body thrust forward from the impact – causing a fatal head injury and an irreparable loss for her family.

Automobile accidents are the leading cause of death for children ages five to 14, yet child car seats – the primary way to protect kids in crashes – are subject to some of the least rigorous testing of any consumer products.

Lethal Effects

Defective safety seats can cause or contribute to brain damage, spinal and neck injury, paralysis, loss of limbs and death. No one is more aware of that than Philadelphia lawyer Stewart Eisenberg, who has represented families like Jocelyn's for more than 25 years.



“With the Evenflo seat, there were clear design flaws such as handle instability and insufficient padding that should have been caught and repaired before they posed any threat to children,” says Eisenberg, founding senior partner of Eisenberg, Rothweiler, Winkler, Eisenberg & Jeck, P.C. “But some companies only do the minimal testing required instead of subjecting their products to tests involving side impacts and crashes at higher speeds.”

Lax Regulation

In fact, child safety seats aren't regulated by the Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) at all. That job falls to the National Highway and Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), which by many accounts is considered an understaffed, underfunded agency that's been a casualty of the deregulation rage.

Although some regulatory improvements have been made, defects continue to be found. Problems such as loose shoulder straps, poor pelvic and head protection, cracked parts, and the inability of the safety belt, buckles or mounting base to keep the seat properly in place can spell disaster – but only if parents know about them and car seat manufacturers take the right steps to fix them.

Unfortunately, manufacturers are expected to self-govern instead of being subject to more rigorous government testing and inspection. Even if a company realizes its product has a safety vulnerability that could put thousands of children at risk, it doesn't have to report the problem if it is not included in the narrow scope of the NHTSA's required testing – which at this point is limited to lower speeds and front-end collisions only.

Parent Compliance Challenges

To add to the problem, many parents have trouble choosing the right seat for their car thanks to a myriad of product choices – not all of which are compatible with all car

interiors. Proper installation and use of the seats is also an ongoing issue despite intensive education campaigns.

And car manufacturers are ignoring millions of “forgotten children” – those who are too mature for booster seats but not tall and large enough to be adequately protected by regular safety belts. You know how difficult it is to expect an 8- or 9-year-old child eager for independence to continue using a booster seat, but the reality is that safety belts are only designed for adults.



Top 10 Car Seats

Shopping for the perfect car seat? Don't get overwhelmed. Here's help in deciding what's right for you.

Recall Limitations

While the NHTSA receives an average of eight child restraint recalls each year, that doesn't mean all other seats that are not recalled are safe. When consumers report problems with their seats, the CPSC can issue a warning, and the NHTSA might investigate if there appears to be sufficient cause.

Depending on the results, the company might be required to conduct a recall – but in many cases recalls are voluntary. Often they involve situations where the original seat can be modified with a provided repair kit rather than being completely replaced.

Be in the Know

Don't let your family become a statistic. Reduce the risks by taking the following steps:

Learn the recommendations. Learn which restraint systems are recommended for your child at different stages by reading the American Academy of Pediatrics' car seat guide at <http://www.aap.org>.

Shop for safety. The most popular seats are not always the safest ones. Make safety your top priority by checking out objective buying guides and car seat ratings from organizations such as Consumer Reports (<http://www.consumerreports.org>), which does its own testing. Don't ever buy a used car seat. If you can't afford a new car seat, check with your local hospital or clinic as many provide free seats to parents in need.

Install it right. Make sure you buy your seat from a store that will allow you to either try it out in your car before buying or return it if it doesn't work properly. Follow the manufacturer's installation instructions and have a certified safety technician double-check to make sure you're doing it right. Check your local fire station or visit <http://www.nhtsa.gov> to find the inspection station closest to you.

Register your car seat. Don't throw that registration card out when you buy a child safety seat! Fill it out and send it in so that the manufacturer can notify you in the event of a recall. If you don't have the original registration card, call the NHTSA's auto safety

hotline at 1-888-327-4236 or visit its website at <http://www.nhtsa.gov> for help with registration and a listing of car seat manufacturer websites (many of which let you register your seat online).

Check for recalls. For the latest recalls, visit the NHTSA website and access its Child Restraint Recall Campaign listings. The site also gives you the chance to regularly receive updated recall information via RSS feed.

Take action. If you find out your child's seat has been recalled, take it back to the store where you bought it or contact the manufacturer for advice on next steps.

*not her real name