

Child seats: fitting services exposed

Our undercover inspections reveal poor advice and potentially dangerous fitting at shops

The child car seat fitting service at some shops is so bad that it could endanger your child's life.

Our spot checks at ten stores of major UK chains revealed inaccurate advice and fitting, and at two stores sales staff were happy to let our undercover researchers drive away with a potentially dangerous child seat fitted in the back of their car.

Our crash test expert described the fitting of a Britax Renaissance at one Halfords store as 'a dog's dinner'. It had been fitted so badly that the seat belt didn't go through any of the child seat's correct guide marks. Yet the assistant told us: 'That fits nice and solid.' Our expert disagreed. He said the seat could fly forward in a crash and that the child could be killed if her head hit the front seat.

And at a Toys R Us branch, staff fitting a Britax First Class positioned the seat belt buckle in such a way that it was likely to break open in a crash. The unrestrained seat and child would then be flung forward, or even out of the car completely.

'In these circumstances a child has a high chance of being killed or seriously injured,' our expert told us. However, the Toys R Us assistant had assured us that the buckle was in the right place and that there was no danger of 'buckle crunch', as this problem is called (see 'Parents' checklist', opposite).

POOR ADVICE

Figures from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) suggest that the vast majority of child car seats in the UK are incorrectly fitted

Up to 80 per cent of child seats are fitted incorrectly

by parents – with 10 per cent fitted dangerously. Even a *Which?* Best Buy child seat can be dangerous if it's not properly installed.

While many stores sell child seats, not all offer a fitting service. Such advice should be invaluable for parents, but only if shops get it right. And with new laws coming into force in September, which make it compulsory to fit all children up to 135cm (around age 11) in a suitable child restraint, fitting services are becoming even more important.

Posing as parents, we went undercover with council road safety officers to test the free fitting

STORES

WE VISITED

Halfords
John Lewis
Mamas & Papas
Mothercare
Toys R Us

services offered by trained staff at two branches of Halfords, John Lewis, Mamas & Papas, Mothercare and Toys R Us. Where seats were fitted badly, we bought them to take away for further inspection.

We asked for a forward-facing seat (suitable for children from about nine months to four years old). However, we expected staff to ask the height and weight of the child, as these are the most important factors when choosing a seat. We also expected fitters to suggest that we take in any other car we might use, to check the seat fitted that, too.

A real problem

When we visited Essex County Council's weekly free fitting service at Benfleet, we found several parents unhappy with the way a store had fitted and sold them a child seat.

Darren Clark (right) a fireman, criticised the fitting service at his local store: 'The one they fitted rocked all over the place. It wasn't fitting right. I've cut enough people out of cars to know how important the right

seat is and so I came along here.' After trying out four different seats, the county council advice centre finally found him a suitable one.

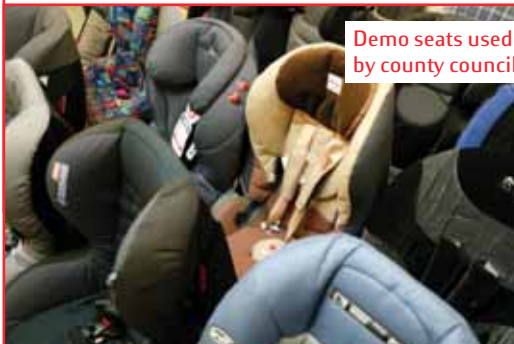
Phil Foster went to the same store to find a seat which matched the pushchair he'd bought. But on the trip home from hospital with his new-born daughter, he became concerned with the amount of movement in the seat. He went



Staff help Darren find the right seat

back to the store, which insisted it was fine. Unconvinced, he had come to the fitting centre, where staff told him the seat wasn't suitable. He told us: 'I'm annoyed. You trust them to give you the right information and they advertise that their staff are trained, but the seat wasn't fit for purpose.'

Demo seats used by county council





A county council expert shows a mother how it should be done

goes against the training procedures it provides for retailers. The most positive finding from our spot checks was that the standard of advice and fitting at the two Mothercare stores was very good.

SEATS 'TOO LOOSE'

For a child seat to offer protection in a crash, it must be fitted as tightly as possible. But many of the seats we inspected were installed too loosely and our experts thought that more suitable seats could have been recommended.

Mothercare offered the best fitting service in our checks

Fitters at every store except Mothercare didn't check properly to see whether seats were secure. Many gave the child seat a sharp tug forwards, holding on to the internal harness, but failed to check movement from side to side – which can be critical in a side-on crash. At one Mamas & Papas store the assistant admitted the seat moved sideways but said: 'You could tighten it, but I can't'.

Such poor advice points to a high-risk lottery for parents. With the exception of Mothercare, at least one fitter from each of the chains we visited installed a seat wrongly or failed to test fully for movement. Kevin Clinton, Head of Road Safety at RoSPA, said of our findings: 'It's very worrying that stores with supposedly trained, competent staff are giving incorrect information. We know parents find it difficult to fit child seats properly but if stores give poor advice, it makes matters even worse.'

However, three out of ten fitters didn't ask for any details about the child, while half said they didn't think we needed to bring our other car in. Both Mamas & Papas stores said we could use the seat in our other car without coming in for a fitting.

Staff at one John Lewis branch didn't ask any of the basic questions. The assistant also relied too heavily on the seat manufacturer's customer helpline and told us that if Britax said the seat should fit, 'then really there's no point me going out to the car'. Britax later confirmed that this advice

which? says

We criticised retailers after similar findings two years ago (*Which?*, June 2004, p6), yet children's lives are still at risk from poor fitting. At the time the stores promised action but it's hard to see any improvement.

It's estimated that around 2,000 children a year will be saved from injury or death when new child seat laws are introduced in September – but only if seats are fitted properly. With as many as 80 per cent of all child seats in the UK installed incorrectly, an expert fitting service is crucial. The onus is on retailers to get it right.

All four retailers we contacted expressed concern about our findings. They stressed there was ongoing child-seat fitting training for staff and that they would feed our findings into that.

Certainly, fitting child car seats can be tricky, even for experienced users following the instructions. We hope that the Isofix system, which will be standard in all new cars from later this year, will help parents fit seats more easily. It simplifies installation, as child seats are fitted in place using fixed mounting points instead of the adult seat belts.



'Buckle crunch' found at one Toys R Us store

Seat belt wrongly routed through guides at Halfords

Parents' checklist

Remember the following advice when shopping for a child car seat.

- The weight and height of your child are more important factors than age when choosing a suitable seat.
- Try the seat in your car before you buy. Even a *Which?* Best Buy child seat might not fit safely in your car.
- The seat belt should be as tight as possible, to minimise the seat's forward and sideways movement.
- The best fit for a child seat is likely to be with the back-seat headrest removed and safely stowed away.
- Watch out for buckle crunch – where the seat belt buckle is bent around the seat frame (see left). The fitting booklet will show you where the belt and buckle should lie.
- Don't place anything beneath the child seat to protect the car's seats (a blanket, for example).
- Never use a rearward-facing child seat in front of an active airbag – it can cause severe injury.
- Never buy child seats secondhand.
- Make sure the seat you choose fits every car it will be used in.
- For more tips, see www.which.co.uk/childseats or visit www.childcarseats.org.uk (RoSPA).