

The new law on carrying children under 135cm and aged under 12 in vehicles, which came into effect on 18th September 2006, has led to an increase in drivers' thinking about both deactivating front passenger airbags and fitting ISOFIX child seat mountings.

Drivers must consider these issues when ordering new vehicles, as airbag deactivation can have serious safety implications that should be considered for inclusion in your driver policy guidelines.



Deactivating airbags

Children must NEVER be carried in rear-facing baby seats in the front seat of a vehicle fitted with an active passenger airbag (see also advice on page 2 about airbags and forward-facing children in front seats).

Because of this, many cars are fitted as standard with a switch to deactivate the passenger airbag so a baby seat can be carried. On some vehicles, deactivation switches are an added-cost option, which may be cheaper to order with a new vehicle than to have retrofitted by a dealer later on at a cost of £50 to £100.

Deactivation of airbags has clear policy implications for fleet drivers from a safety perspective. Experience shows that many drivers switch off the airbag when the baby arrives and only reactivate it (if they remember) when the child is old enough for a forward-facing seat. This puts front-seat passengers at increased risk of serious injury in a collision and might lead to an insurer refusing to cover a claim for damages.

Drivers need to be reminded that, if their car has a deactivation switch, the airbag should be deactivated only while a baby is being carried in the front seat and then reactivated before an older child or adult is carried. Of course, this applies to private cars used on business as well as to company vehicles.



If an airbag switch is not available, it may only be possible to have the airbag deactivated by a main dealer. Doing so may affect the vehicle's warranty and the driver's insurance, so drivers should look for an alternative wherever possible.

Most manufacturers recommend replacing unused airbags after 10 years. This should be taken into consideration when setting policy rules for privately-owned vehicles used on company business.

ISOFIX mountings

ISOFIX, which stands for "International Standards Organisation FIX", is a new standard intended to make fitting child seats into cars quick and simple. ISOFIX child seats simply plug into ISOFIX points built into the car during manufacture.

The mountings hold the seat more securely than using seat belts: research shows that a high proportion of conventional child seats are incorrectly fitted and would provide little or no protection in a crash.

A growing number of cars are made with ISOFIX points as standard – Britax, the child seat manufacturer, has identified more than 200 models currently available in

the UK. The ultimate aim is for all child seats to plug into any ISOFIX-fitted car.

Drivers can find out what ISOFIX seats are available and which vehicles they fit by contacting the car and seat manufacturers. RoSPA (www.rospace.com) and the Child Car Seats web site (www.childcarseats.org.uk) also offer useful information.

The new child seat law

Under the new law, which came into effect on September 18, any child under the age of 12 years and less than 4ft 5in (135cm) tall must use an appropriate child seat or booster seat whenever they travel in any vehicle.

Once a child reaches their 12th birthday or the minimum height, whichever comes first, they are allowed to travel using an adult seat belt, although the Government recommends that they should ideally continue to use a booster cushion until they are 4ft 11in (150cm) tall.

The only exceptions to the rule are when travelling in a taxi (in which case children should wear an adult seat belt), or when two occupied child seats make it impossible to fit a third in between. In the latter case, a child over three years old is allowed to use an adult seat belt, although if there is room it may be safer to travel in the front of the vehicle in a child seat.

Children younger than three are only permitted to travel in vehicles other than taxis if they are in a

properly-secured baby or child seat. If a car has neither adult seat belts nor child seat fixings, under-threes are simply not allowed to travel in it.

There is no law against children travelling in the front seat, although most experts believe they are safer in the rear seats. Wherever they sit, they must use the appropriate child seats or restraints for their age and height.

Babies must NEVER be carried in a rear-facing seat in the front of the vehicle with an active passenger airbag. Children sitting forward-facing in the front need to be sufficiently far from the airbag to be out of its deployment zone in a crash (the car manufacturer can provide details).

'Unexpected necessity'

If a driver unexpectedly needs to carry a child and a suitable seat is not available, a child over three can wear an adult seat belt. The Department for Transport says this exemption does not cover school runs or other journeys planned in advance. It is never legal in any circumstance to carry an under-three-year-old unless they are in a suitable child seat.

Penalties

The Police can issue a £30 on the spot fine for breaking the law on child seats. If the case goes to court, the maximum fine is £500. The driver is responsible for all children in the vehicle.

	Front seat	Rear seat	Who is responsible
Driver	Seat belt must be worn if fitted		Driver
Child under 3 years of age	Properly secured baby or child seat must be used	Correct baby or child seat must be used. If one is not available in a taxi, may travel unrestrained	Driver
Child from third birthday to their 12th birthday or 4ft 5in (135cm) in height, whichever they reach first	Correct child seat or booster seat/cushion must be used	Correct child seat must be used where seat belts fitted. Must use a seat belt if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in a taxi, the correct child restraint unavailable; - on a short and occasional trip, the correct child restraint not available; - two occupied child restraints prevent fitting a third 	Driver
Child from their 12th birthday or more than 135cm in height	Seat belt must be worn if fitted	Seat belt must be worn if fitted	Driver
Adult passengers (14 years and over)	Seat belt must be worn if fitted	Seat belt must be worn if fitted.	Passenger

Appropriate child restraints

	Seat faces	Weight and age	Example
Infant Carrier	Rearward	Children up to 13kg (approx. birth to 9 months)	
Child seat	Forward	From 9kg to 18kg (approx 9 months to 4 years)	
High back booster seat		Children 15kg – 36kg (from approx 4 – 11 years)	
Booster seat		Children 15kg – 36kg (from approx 4 – 11 years)	

Future changes

From May 2008 all child restraints must comply with the UN ECE 44.03 standard (or subsequent versions). Child seats manufactured to the 44.03 standard have been available for many years.

Further information

Visit Arval's web site at www.arval.co.uk for the latest information on child and passenger safety and links to other useful sites.

Contact Arval

If you have any questions about the airbags, ISOFIX or the new seat belt law, speak to your usual Arval contact or send an email to info@arval.co.uk

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