

Films documenting motor-vehicle crash tests, using dummies to simulate occupants, show in graphic and frightening detail what happens to unrestrained automobile passengers in a 35 mile per hour head-on collision. The car stops. Passengers don't. At least, not until they have been thrown with devastating force against the windshield, the instrument panel or from the vehicle itself.

For a baby being held in its mother's arms, the impact can be doubly harsh. The child first strikes the dashboard, and if the mother is not restrained, is then crushed by the weight of the mother's body. To an infant involved in such an accident, the old saying "safe as a baby in its mother's arms" is a cruel irony. Mother love cannot save a child from the consequences of a motor vehicle crash unless that love and concern have led the parents to provide the protection afforded by a child safety seat.

We have made encouraging progress in this country in reducing the infant mortality rate. From 1970 to 1980, infant mortality dropped 38 percent. It has continued to decline in 1981 and 1982. Yet while we are making progress against the diseases and the circumstances that kill babies in their cradles, we have been less successful in preventing serious injury or death to children in cars.

Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for children after they have passed the first few weeks of life. In 1981 more than 1,700 young lives were lost and thousands of children painfully injured, many permanently, in auto crashes. Behind these stark statistics lurks an even greater tragedy: many of these deaths and injuries

are avoidable. It's estimated that 90 percent of the fatalities and 70 percent of the severe injuries to children could be prevented with the proper and consistent use of child safety seats and the wearing of safety belts by larger children. (While rear seat passengers are less vulnerable, the risk differs only in degree. In either case, the unrestrained child is battered by unyielding interior structures or crushed by the weight of an adult body propelled by the momentum of a crash.)

Safety holds a very high place among my concerns as Secretary of Transportation. The responsibility for travel safety runs deep within the Department, and we are currently engaged with private industry in a nationwide campaign to persuade people to use the safety belts already provided in all our cars and trucks.

We have made some gains. Adult safety belt usage has increased in recent months and now stands at about 13 percent in our most recent survey. For children, the rate -- gratefully -- is somewhat better, although still far short of a majority level.

Sadly, parental neglect -- the failure to properly secure children when riding in a car -- is responsible for many of the deaths and injuries incurred in highway mishaps.

This neglect takes two forms. Parents either do not buy the child safety seats that are available, or they fail to use them correctly. As a result, 90% of all youngsters are not properly "buckled up" when riding in a car -- generally with one or both parents.

Historically, parents have been willing to pay any price, even to sacrifice themselves for the lives of their children. Parents are careful to use containers that protect their youngsters from drugs or poisons that could snuff out their lives in minutes. Millions of parents "put off" investing in a child safety seat that meets



Federal standards, even though children are 40 to 50 times more likely to die in a motor vehicle accident than from preventable diseases. Most parents are meticulous in seeing that their children get their "shots" on schedule -- even though it may take several hours to complete the inoculations while it takes only minutes to give a child the protection of a safety seat.

Unbelievable as it may seem, parents who exercise caution in these other areas expose their young children almost daily to situations that could take their lives instantly or handicap them indefinitely. A safety seat, of course, can guarantee a child's survival in a massive accident, but tests by our National Highway Traffic Safety Administration prove that the chances of survival are greatly enhanced if the child is properly restrained.

Even where a safety seat is being used, we find all too frequently that it has been installed incorrectly or that the child is improperly secured in it. Some seats, for example, require the use of a strap to anchor the top of the seat to the car. Without the anchor strap, the seat -- which is "top heavy" -- may fall forward on impact, risking the collision with objects that proper use of the seat would prevent.

Another important word of caution: the car safety seat belt alone, even though fastened over the seat and the child is not sufficient protection. The belt can and should secure the safety seat to the seat of the car, but only the harness straps provided with the safety seat can hold the child securely. The harness straps also nullify the "catapult" effect in a crash situation.

The wise parents will not only purchase an approved safety seat, but will learn how to fasten it in both front and rear seats. They will remember, too, to buckle their



own safety belts. There are cases where a child becomes an orphan after being carefully secured, because the parents neglected to fasten their own belts.

The value of safety seats for children becomes most apparent in crash situations. But they are also invaluable in sudden stops, and in cases where a driver has had to swerve to avoid a child or animal in the street or a motorist backing out of a driveway. Such unexpected movements can throw a child into the dash or against a door causing serious injury.

No public agency can compensate for parental complacency or negligence, but many state and local organizations -- recognizing the need to educate parents and provide services -- are endeavoring to help protect the unprotected. In Oregon a county provides child restraint information for prenatal and parenting classes and in maternity wards of six hospitals; a loan program provides safety seats on a temporary basis to parents. A similar program is made available in Massachusetts by the Boston Hospital for Women; in North Carolina there is a "Try Before You Buy" program permitting parents to borrow a child restraint seat for a few days to determine what type would best suit their vehicle and needs; in New Jersey a film is shown to mothers of newborn children and they are given an actual demonstration on the use of such devices; there are more than 100 child seat programs in Michigan and in one city alone 1,000 infant and child seats are on loan to parents of young children.

In Iowa volunteer organizations purchase infant seats for rent to parents for a small fee for nine months. When the seat is returned, the parents receive a partial refund and are urged to purchase a larger seat for their child. The American Red Cross operates its KISS ("Keep Infants Safely Seated") program in chapters all over the



country. There are education and safety seat loan programs being conducted in many American communities, by private groups as well as public agencies.

To further encourage the use of child safety seats, many state legislatures this past year have followed the example of Tennessee which, in 1978, was the first to make such seats mandatory for children under four. Since that time there have been only two infant motor vehicle fatalities in that state. Rhode Island has experienced no such fatalities since its law was passed in 1980. Today, more than 33 states and the District of Columbia have laws requiring safety seats or belt use by children under certain ages.

In addition, parents in most localities can get information from physicians, nurses, insurance companies and their agents, police, auto dealers and hospital administrators. Information on tested and approved child safety seats is also available by writing to our Department's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Washington, D.C., 20590, or calling -- toll free -- 1-800-424-9393.

A pediatrician in an emergency room made this comment: "Parents spend money on music lessons, swimming classes, sports activities and other forms of recreation and education for their children, but don't spend a dime or a few minutes to keep them alive in a car." So often parents rationalize: "I'm only going down to the store, I won't be driving fast." They ignore statistics that show some 80% of the fatal accidents occur within a few blocks of their home and at speeds of 40 mph or less.

As parents know better than anyone, a child is a fragile, lovable addition to a family. He or she has no choice in the child seat decision, but is wholly dependent on the care and protection of parents or other adults. Those responsible must recognize that the simple use of a safety seat could prolong that new life and shield that little

body from serious harm. A good safety seat and a few moments of extra caution are among the best investments parents can make in their children's welfare and in their future.

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