

Rental Cars and Child Seats

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Very year in Canada, over 4,000 children are injured in automobile accidents and about 70 are killed. Consequently, informed parents are very concerned' about restraining their children properly in motor vehicles.

Most parents own a car seat for their young child. Proper installation of a car seat, however, is just as important as having any car seat at all. But installation of the seat can be confusing to some parents. Depending on the type of seat or car, parents may encounter such things as locking clips, abdominal shields, or a five-point harness. A recent government safety blitz in Regina found improper installation with 100% of the inspected car seats. A little education; however, is all-that is needed to solve this type of problem.

All modern toddler car seats (for children 9 to 1 kilograms) require securing with both a seat belt plus a tether strap on top. Infant seats are rear facing and do not require a tether strap. Proper installation of all seats, though, is required by law. Section 65(2) of the Alberta Highway Traffic Act specifically states:

“No person shall ... operate a motor vehicle ... in which a child is a passenger unless

- (a) The motor vehicle is equipped with the prescribed child seating assembly,
- (b) The child seating assembly is properly installed, and
- (c) The child is occupying and is properly secured in the child seating assembly.”

The legislation places a very high onus on parents. They must both install the car seat correctly and then use it. Although Alberta's laws place a duty on parents to transport children safely, the laws put no such burden on certain businesses that earn a profit from motor vehicles. For example, the Highway Traffic Act regulations exempt taxicabs and “motor vehicles that are rented or leased for periods of 14 days or less.” These businesses have no legal duty to provide proper child restraints. Parents may ask, therefore, why businesses like car rental companies are exempted. Did the government believe this was in the best interest of children?

Many car rental companies take child safety very seriously regardless of the laws. Some car agencies will properly install child seats for their customers.

Others will not install the seats (perhaps for insurance reasons) but will provide parents with all the necessary equipment. These services are not, however, imposed by law in Alberta.

My wife and I recently rented a minivan from a national company at an airport. We were surprised that the toddler seat we requested was not installed. It sat loosely on the back seat. Moreover, the vehicle was not equipped with a tether bolt to secure the seat properly. An hour of arguing revealed that the technicians did not know how to install the seat and, further, we could only get a tether bolt if we drove the van and the unsecured seat to a downtown garage for installation. We were not pleased, and these people are no longer on our Christmas card list later learned that we were not the first victims of this type of surprise. We talked to some parents who travel with their own child car seat and assembly equipment. Regrettably, some car rental agencies are ignorant of child safety.

All of this shows that parents must be cautious and diligent when renting a car. Moreover, perhaps it is time for all provincial governments to impose child seat safety rules on car rental companies. Perhaps these rental companies will object because they want to avoid the inconvenience associated with child seats. That is, however, no excuse. Children deserve no less protection in rental cars than other motor vehicles.