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# Occupant Protection — The Family Edition

## WHAT IS OCCUPANT PROTECTION?

Seat belts save lives. The Occupant Protection Program at the Virgin Islands Office of Highway Safety plans and develops safety programs designed to reduce the risk of injuries and fatalities for vehicle occupants—drivers and their passengers. These programs promote the use of seat belts, child car seats, and automatic occupant protection systems (e.g., air bags). Each one of us plays a role in ensuring that we reduce the risk of injuries for ourselves and for others. **Buckle up, VI!**

## BEYOND “GOOD TO DO”

Parents want the best for their children. We want our children to grow up strong and healthy, to have great experiences, and to live well. Until our babies are able to take care of themselves, it is our responsibility to keep them safe. This is true even during everyday activities like riding in a car. Keeping your children restrained in an appropriate car seat is the safe thing to do. But did you know that it is required by law?

Chapter 20 of the VI Code provides the laws that protect children in the following ways:

- Passengers up to one-year old or 20 pounds must sit in an appropriate *rear-facing* car seat in the **back seat** of the car
- Passengers ages one to five, or up to 40 pounds must sit in an appropriate forward-facing car seat in the **back seat** of the car
- Passengers 40-80 pounds, up to eight years of age, or less than 4’9” tall, must sit in an appropriate booster seat in the **back seat** of the car
- Passengers who have outgrown a booster seat to thirteen years of age must sit in the **back seat** of the car and must use the car’s seat belt.
- Passengers fourteen years of age or more must wear a seatbelt, whether sitting in the front or rear of the car.

Of course there are citations and fines involved for drivers who do not follow these laws. But more importantly, there are life-threatening consequences for unsecured passengers involved in a crash.

Crashes are never planned. Even the best drivers can be involved in a crash. It is important that each passenger is restrained and prepared for the worse. In life, we rarely get second chances. Do the right thing for your safety and for the safety of the passengers in your care. **Buckle Up, VI! Every trip, Everyone. Every time!**



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### POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Car seats and seat belts save lives
- Make wearing seat belts a consistent priority for everyone
- Be sure that seat belts are used correctly and car seats are installed safely.
- Remember, seat belts and car seats are required by law. Buckle up!



## LEADING BY EXAMPLE

One of the safest choices drivers and passengers can make is to buckle up. Historically, seat belt usage rates throughout the territory have been low compared to many states and territories. According to data generated from the 2020 Observed Seatbelt Use for Passenger Vehicle Front Outboard Occupants (Seatbelt Survey), the territory currently reports a 68.2% seat belt usage rate compared to a 90.7% national rate. This low seat belt usage rate demonstrates a lack of a safety culture within the territory.

Together, however, we can shift that culture; it starts with us. Remember that we are our children's first teachers. They learn more by what we do than by what we say. Their eyes are on us.

When you get into a car, be sure that you make wearing your seatbelt a priority. Every passenger in the car is required to wear a seat belt. Children, ages eight and under, must be seated in an appropriate car safety seat—no compromises. “The discomfort” of the seatbelt does not compare to the discomfort of the injuries and possible fatalities caused by a crash. Seat belts save lives.

In life, there is no Undo button. Crashes are never planned and they happen so quickly. Let us make every effort to keep ourselves and the ones we love safe. No negotiations, no excuses, no regrets.

**Buckle Up, VI Every trip. Everyone. Every time!**

*“The “discomfort” of the seatbelt does not compare to the discomfort of the injuries and possible fatalities caused by a crash.”*

## CAR SEAT DO'S AND DON'TS

- Don't ever install a child's car seat in the front seat of a car. It is not safe!
- Do recline your rear-facing infant seat 35 to 45 degrees. Babies should never sit too upright.
- Do replace a car seat that was involved in a severe crash, especially if there is visible damage to the seat.
- Don't face an infant forward. Always face infants towards the back seat.
- Don't buy a seat from a flea market or yard sale unless you know the history of that seat. Car seats only have a life of five to six years. Be aware of this when passing a seat down from one child to the next.
- Do ensure that straps pass over the child's shoulders, not the neck. Also, the chest clip should rest between the arm-pits.
- Don't hang toys from the seat's handle. They can become projectiles in a crash, injuring passengers.
- Do ensure there are no gaps in the straps. If you can pinch extra webbing on the straps, they are too loose. Tighten all straps to reduce space for shifting.
- Do use warm soapy water to clean the straps of the seat and seat belts. Disinfectant and bleach will weaken the straps.

**DO'S & DON'TS**

## SEAT BELT SAFETY FOR ADULTS

- **Buckling up is the single most effective thing you can do to protect yourself in a crash.** Being buckled up during a crash helps keep you safe and secure inside your vehicle; being completely ejected from a vehicle is almost always deadly.
- **Air bags are designed to work with seat belts, not replace them.** If you don't wear your seat belt, you could be thrown into a rapidly opening frontal air bag. Such force could injure or even kill you.
- **Guidelines to buckle up safely**
  - The lap belt and shoulder belt are secured across the pelvis and rib cage, which are better able to withstand crash forces than other parts of your body.
  - Place the shoulder belt across the middle of your chest and away from your neck.
  - The lap belt rests across your hips, not your stomach.
  - NEVER put the shoulder belt behind your back or under an arm.
- **Be a good example.** Always wear your safety belt and insist that all passengers do the same.

Taken from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration <https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/seat-belts#issue-adults>

## Four stages of protection for your child in a car

### 1 REAR-FACING



0 - 2+ YRS OLD

### 2 FORWARD-FACING



2 - 7 YRS OLD

### 3 BOOSTER SEAT



4 - 12 YRS OLD

### 4 SEAT BELT



8 - ADULT

## KNOW THE STAGES

A car seat only works if it fits properly and is used correctly. Make sure children are properly buckled in a car seat, booster seat, or seat belt – whichever is appropriate for their weight, height, and age.

- Use a **rear-facing car seat** from birth, for as long as possible (see guidance provided on your seat).
  - For the best possible protection, infants and toddlers should be buckled in a rear-facing car seat, in the back seat, until they reach the maximum weight and height limits of their car seat.
  - Check the car seat manual and labels on the car seat for weight and height limits.
- After outgrowing the rear-facing car seat, use a **forward-facing car seat** until at least age 5.
  - When children outgrow their rear-facing car seats, they should be buckled in a forward-facing car seat, in the back seat, until they reach the upper weight or height limit of their car seat.
  - Check the car seat manual and labels on the car seat for weight and height limits.
- After outgrowing the forward-facing car seat, use a **booster seat** until seat belts fit properly.
  - Once children outgrow their forward-facing car seat, they should be buckled in a belt-positioning booster seat, in the back seat, until seat belts fit properly. Seat belts fit properly when the lap belt lays across the upper thighs (not the stomach) and the shoulder belt lays across the chest (not the neck).
- Once seat belts fit properly without a booster seat, use a **seat belt on every trip**.
  - Children no longer need to use a booster seat once seat belts fit them properly. Seat belts fit properly when the lap belt lays across the upper thighs (not the stomach) and the shoulder belt lays across the chest (not the neck).
  - Proper seat belt fit usually occurs when children are about 4 feet 9 inches tall and aged 9–12 years. Seat belt fit can vary by vehicle so check fit in all vehicles. For the best possible protection, keep children properly buckled in the back seat.

Refer to the age, weight and height restrictions described on your car seat for guidance and to ensure that you are using the right seat for your child's size.

Taken from the Center from Disease Control <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/child-passenger-safety/>

### WHY REAR-FACING?

It would be so convenient to look over our shoulders to stare into our beautiful baby's face. However, an infant must always ride facing the back seat. Here's why:

Should a crash occur, after the car stops, everything in the car will continue moving in the direction in which the car was traveling. (Newton's Law). **If your baby is facing forward**, her head—the heaviest part of her body—will whip forward towards the front seat. Although her seat may keep her in place, the force of the crash will cause severe injury to her soft, developing neck bones and spinal cord. This could permanently disable her or end her life.

**If during a crash a baby is facing the rear seat**, the force of the crash will be better spread over her body. Although her entire body may shift towards the front seat, her neck and spine would be better supported.

Use a rear-facing seat as long as possible. It is literally a matter of life and death.



## VIRGIN ISLANDS OFFICE OF HIGH- WAY SAFETY

The Virgin Islands Office of Highway Safety (VIOHS) is a division of the VI Police Department established by the Government of the Virgin Islands (GVI) in accordance with the Highway Safety Act of 1966.

The goal of the VIOHS, as legislated by the Virgin Islands Senate, is to develop and implement a highway safety program to achieve its mission of reducing the risks of traffic crashes, fatalities and serious injuries on the roadways throughout the U.S. Virgin Islands. The VIOHS is mandated to promote and fund methods to implement traffic safety in the territory.

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## SAFE CAR SEAT INSTALLATION

Car safety seats may be installed with either the vehicle's seat belt or its LATCH (lower anchors and tethers for children) system. LATCH is an attachment system for car safety seats. Lower anchors can be used instead of the seat belt to install the seat, and many parents find them easier to use in some cars. The top tether improves safety provided by the seat and is important to use for all forward-facing seats, even those installed by using the vehicle seat belt. Although the seat belt and LATCH systems are equally safe, caregivers may prefer one system instead of the other. Keep in mind that only one system should be used unless the car safety seat and vehicle manufacturers say it is OK to use 2 systems at the same time.

Vehicles with the LATCH system have lower anchors located in the back seat, where the seat cushions meet. Tether anchors are located behind the seat, either on the panel behind the seat (in sedans) or on the back of the seat, ceiling, or floor (in most minivans, SUVs, hatchbacks, and pickup trucks). All forward-facing car safety seats have tethers or tether connectors that fasten to these anchors. See vehicle owner's manual for highest weight of child allowed to use top tether.

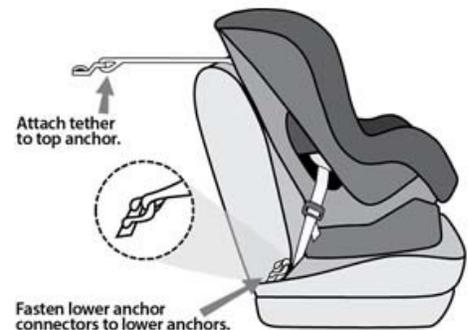
All lower anchors are rated for a maximum weight of 65 pounds (total weight includes car safety seat and child). Parents should check the car safety seat manufacturer's recommendations for maximum weight a child can be to use lower anchors. New car safety seats have the maximum weight printed on their label.

**NOTE: Seat belts**—If you install a car safety seat by using

your vehicle's seat belt, you must make sure the seat belt locks to hold the seat tightly. In most newer cars, you can lock the seat belt by pulling it all the way out and then allowing it to retract to keep the seat belt tight around the car safety seat. In addition, many car safety seats have built-in lock-offs so you can lock the belt without having to lock the seat belt separately as well. Refer to the vehicle owner's manual for details about how your seat belt locks

**Middle of the back seat**—The safest place to ride for all children younger than 13 years is the back seat. If possible, it may be best for the child to ride in the middle of the back seat. However, it is sometimes difficult to install a car safety seat tightly in the middle if the vehicle seat is narrow or uneven. Also, many vehicles do not have lower anchors for the middle seating position. It is safest to put the car safety seat in a position where you can install it tightly with either the lower anchor system or the seat belt; in some cases, this position may be on either side of the back seat rather than in the middle. A child passenger safety technician (CPST or CPS technician) can help you decide which place is best to install your child's car safety seat in your vehicle

Taken from *Healthy Children* <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/on-the-go/Pages/Car-Safety-Seats-Information-for-Families.aspx>



## CPS IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

The VI Office of Highway Safety's (VIOHS) Occupant Protection Program is launching a Child Passenger Safety (CPS) initiative to support resident and visiting motorists and their young passengers. The program aims to train and certify key personnel in our community – police officers, medical professionals, fire fighters, etc.—on providing car seat fitting advice and installation assistance. Motorists with children will be able to seek their assistance to ensure that car seats are both correct for the child's size and properly installed in the vehicle. These CPS fittings stations will be strategically placed throughout the districts to facilitate support for parents while decreasing the risk of injuries for our youngest passengers.

In addition to CPS Fitting Stations, VIOHS will be offering car seats to families in need. By increasing access to appropriate car seats, the program ensures that more children are riding safely on our territory's roads.

Both of these initiative are currently in the process of being established. Please communicate with the program coordinator to inquire about the status of these services, to ask questions about your child's seat, or to participate in the occupant protection program.

Remember, safety begins with us. Be consistent. Be ready. Be safe. Together, we can make the VI a safer place to traverse. **Buckle Up, VI! Every trip. Everyone. Every time!**