Seating arrangements: Are young airline passengers safe in a parent’s lap?

Families planning to travel by airplane often wonder whether they should buy a seat for their young child or have the child sit in a parent’s lap.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) says the safest place for a young child during turbulence or in an emergency is in an approved child restraint system. However, the FAA does not require children ages 2 years and younger to sit in their own seat with a separate safety belt when flying. Therefore, parents must make their own determination on where their child should sit on a commercial flight.

Meanwhile, the National Transportation Safety Board has lobbied for a law requiring one seat per person of any age, including young children.

In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) states in a revised policy statement and technical report that it “strongly supports optimal safety for children and adolescents of all ages during all forms of travel.” The policy statement and technical report, titled Child Passenger Safety from the AAP Committee on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention, were released online this month (www.pediatrics.org) and will be published in the April issue of the AAP’s journal Pediatrics. They replace previous policies that recommended the federal government require the use of restraints on aircraft for children under age 2.

The technical report points out that lack of data on the number of children flying unrestrained or being injured in turbulence makes it difficult to estimate the potential effects of a requirement for restraint use. In addition, the high cost of airline tickets and security screening procedures make it challenging for families to follow best-practice recommendations when flying with young children.

Parents should ensure a proper safety seat is available when they reach their destination, whether that means carrying a seat on board, checking it as baggage or borrowing one for use after landing. Car safety seats that are approved for use on aircraft have a label stating, “This restraint is certified for use in motor vehicles and aircraft.” Parents should be aware that they have the right to use an approved restraint for a child who has a separate seat.

Families who don’t purchase a separate seat for a child under age 2 can try to book travel during off times and ask to be placed next to an empty seat. Then, they can secure their child in a child restraint system in the seat without having to buy a separate ticket.

Another alternative for parents with children weighing 22-44 pounds is to pay about $75 for an FAA-approved harness-type restraint.


— Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff