



# EDUCATING THE EDUCATORS – THE KEY TO CHILD ROAD SAFETY

By Caroline Milburn

Parental confusion about using the safest, age and size-appropriate car seats for children could be reduced if family day care services were better equipped to pass on safety information to families, according to a new study.

It found that family day care services were a vital but underused resource for educating parents about how to safely transport children in cars.

“Parents see early childhood educators as good, credible sources of general health information about children and keeping children safe in cars is a health issue,” said the study’s senior researcher, Dr Julie Brown, of Neuroscience Research Australia (NeuRA), an independent, not-for-profit medical research institute.

“Family day care educators have lots of close interactions with parents so there is great scope for utilising educators as delivery points for health promotion. We’ve shown in other studies that the quality of child restraint use in cars can be improved if we provide good, coordinated support to educators about child restraint information so that they can pass that knowledge on to parents.”

Family day care educators are registered with a family day care service to care for children aged from 0-12 in the educator’s home. Family day care is the fastest growing area in the early childhood sector. In 2015 the number of family day care services in Australia has increased by 20 per cent within a year.

Educators regularly use their own cars to take children to and from school, to kindergarten or to other activities.

The study by Dr Brown and her colleagues is the first to investigate child car restraint safety practices and knowledge among family day care educators and the extent to which this knowledge is being passed on to parents.

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Dr Julie Brown, Neuroscience Research Australia

Eighty-two educators and 142 families from 32 family day care services across urban and regional Victoria were surveyed as part of the study by the research team from NeuRA, the University of New South Wales and VicRoads, Victoria's road safety authority.

The study found 70 per cent of educators gave parents advice about child restraints in cars and 88 per cent of educators said they had received training about the correct use of child restraints. But only nine per cent of families surveyed said their family day care educator was a source of information about child restraints.

"A more structured approach to training and support for family day care services is required to ensure consistent and effective information exchange with parents," the study said. "While family day care educators are a potential health promotion delivery point about child restraint use, this potential is currently being underutilised."

Among those educators who advised parents about the correct way to use restraints, most gave the advice verbally or handed brochures to parents. Dr Brown said it was unclear why there was such a discrepancy between the high number of educators giving information to parents and the low numbers of parents reporting that educators were a source of information about the correct use of child restraints in cars.

"Parent's don't cite educators as a source of information and we don't know why that is," Dr Brown said. "It could be that they don't recognise the informal transition of knowledge that the educator is passing on or that if an educator passes on a brochure from a local road safety agency the parents see the agency as the source of information rather than the educator."

"The type of information being passed on and the way it is being passed on to parents is variable. We need to ensure

that educators get the best information and that there is more consistency between services in delivering the information."

The study's findings were published recently in the prestigious journal *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education*. Most of the families who chose to respond to the survey were highly educated and came from high socio-economic backgrounds.

When asked if they knew Australia's laws for children travelling in vehicles, 67 per cent of the families surveyed said they were confident about their level of knowledge, but few could correctly state the minimum age when children can use forward facing child safety seats and booster seats.

The biggest area of confusion for parents, involved not knowing when older children are legally allowed to graduate from their booster seat to an adult seat belt or allowed to sit in the front seat.

Under Australian law, all children aged up to seven are required to use appropriate child car seats when travelling in a motor vehicle. The law's minimum standards for transporting children in vehicles require that:

- Children aged up to at least six months old must use a rear facing child car seat
- Children aged up to at least four must use a forward facing child car seat
- Children aged up to at least seven must use a booster seat
- Children aged beyond seven must use a booster seat or an adult seat belt

Dr Brown said family day care educators generally had good knowledge about appropriate child restraints in cars. But there was room to improve educator and parental knowledge, particularly about when it is safe for older children to graduate from using booster seats and when it is safe for them to sit in the front seat. This was especially important for parents from non-English speaking

backgrounds because previous studies had shown that these families were at higher risk of transporting children unsafely.

"Families from non-English speaking backgrounds have problems with the way they restrain children in cars, not because they don't want to do the right thing but because they have difficulty accessing the level of detail they need to understand how to use the appropriate child restraints," Dr Brown said.

"For example there may be a brochure in three different languages saying that a child up to seven must use a restraint. But the level of detail about what sort of restraint for children of different ages may not be in the brochure and you may have to go elsewhere to find that information. That's when these families have difficulty accessing the more detailed information."

Family day care is popular among families and educators from diverse cultural backgrounds. Many of Victoria's newest family day care services are located in population growth areas whose new residents include large numbers of migrants and refugees. Nationally about 38 per cent of family day care educators speak a language other than English, according to federal government figures.

In Victoria almost half of family day care educators are from non-English speaking backgrounds, according to previous research cited in Dr Brown's study.



**“ To our knowledge, this is the first time that something so comprehensive in a range of languages has been developed about the use of child restraints. We’re providing these new resources and structured training for educators to help overcome the issues that the sector and the study have highlighted.”**

Zora Marko, ELAA’s early childhood road safety program Manager

Ms Zora Marko, ELAA’s early childhood road safety program Manager, agrees with the study’s conclusion that the demographic profile of family day care meant the services were ideally placed to reach out to parents from non-English speaking backgrounds to improve their understanding of how to transport children safely.

Ms Marko, has been working with VicRoads and the sector’s peak organisation Family Day Care Australia, over the past few years examining the needs of family day care educators and service providers.

This work has since led to the development of a best practice road safety policy, *Safe Transport Policy (Family Day Care)*, for the family day care sector, with free tailored training and resources to improve educator and parental knowledge about the safe transportation of children.

An information brochure, *Travelling with Children in Cars*, has recently been produced in 22 languages by ELAA, funded through TAC’s Community Grants program. Audio file versions of the brochure have been created in 10 languages, with more languages planned. This translated material complements work ELAA undertakes in delivering Victoria’s early childhood road safety education program, *Starting Out Safely*, funded by VicRoads.

“To our knowledge, this is the first time that something so comprehensive in a range of languages has been developed about the use of child restraints,” Ms Marko said. “We’re providing these new resources and structured training for educators to help overcome the issues that the sector and the study have highlighted.

“If educators are more confident about the quality of the information they’re receiving on child restraints, they’ll be more confident relaying this information more effectively to parents. This is really important for families from non-English speaking backgrounds because they often feel more comfortable seeking information from educators from the same cultural background.”

In August, ELAA launched a website [www.childroadsafety.org.au](http://www.childroadsafety.org.au) containing online versions of the new brochures and other new resources for home-based and centre-based early childhood services.

Ms Marko said the website was developed to provide a central location for educators and parents to get clear, easily accessible information about early childhood road safety education and the safe transportation of children. Most of the website’s material is relevant for use throughout Australia and New Zealand and can be downloaded free.

It includes practical tips such as an easy five-step test to judge when a child can safely graduate from wearing a booster seat to an adult seat belt. The test, devised by road safety experts, is based on a child’s height and best practices that are higher than the minimum standards required under current road safety laws.

### **SAFEST FIT: When a child can use an adult seat belt or sit in the front seat**

#### **The five-step test:**

Use this test to judge whether a child is big enough to be safely restrained by an adult seat belt. The child should be able to:

- 1** Sit with their back against the seat back
- 2** Bend their knees comfortably over the front of the seat cushion
- 3** Sit with the sash belt across their mid-shoulder
- 4** Sit with the lap belt across the top of their thighs
- 5** Remain in this position for the whole trip.

Source: [www.childroadsafety.org.au](http://www.childroadsafety.org.au)

