

AAP National Conference: Learn from the pros how to ensure kids are safe in cars

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It was winter 1996, and Benjamin Hoffman, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, had five consecutive call nights where he cared for a child who had been critically injured in a motor vehicle crash.

“I started noticing when I was out and about, all I saw were unrestrained kids in cars,” recalled Dr. Hoffman, who was working with the Indian Health Service on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico. “I got angry enough about it that I felt like I needed to do something.”

He began by getting certified as a car seat technician. He then helped draft legislation, advocated for better policies and worked with the state government and nonprofit groups to have a broader impact across the state.

Twenty years later, Dr. Hoffman is continuing his quest to keep kids safe in cars by educating pediatricians at the AAP National Conference on best practice recommendations.

“Families say that their pediatrician is their most important source of information on child passenger safety, and it is crucial that we get it right,” he said.

Dr. Hoffman will lead an Interactive Group Forum titled “Confessions of a Car Seat Junkie: What Every Pediatrician Must Know About Child Passenger Safety” from 2-3:30 p.m. Saturday (I1120) and from 2-3:30 p.m. Sunday (I2132) in Room 122 of Moscone North. He will be joined by Joseph O’Neil, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, associate clinical professor of pediatrics at Riley Hospital for Children, Indianapolis. Both are members of the AAP Council on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention Executive Committee.

The first part of the session will be a didactic lecture.

“We spend a little bit of time talking about physics because there’s a tremendous amount of energy and inertia that’s involved in motor vehicle safety,” said Dr. Hoffman, professor of pediatrics at Oregon Health & Science University and medical director of the Tom Sargent Safety Center at Doernbecher Children’s Hospital.

Rest assured, however, you won’t be asked to solve any complex math equations if you attend, he said.

Participants then will break up into small groups and rotate through three stations where they will get hands-on experience using car seats, booster seats and seat belts. Each station will be staffed by a certified car passenger safety technician.

Participants will learn how to position a child in a seat, install seats in cars, and when to transition from car seats to booster seats and from booster seats to seat belts. One of the stations also will cover safe transportation of premature infants and children with special needs such as autism.

Education on the correct use of car seats is sorely needed.

Studies have shown that at least 75% of all car seats are used incorrectly, Dr. Hoffman said. In addition, a study in which he was involved showed 91% of families leaving the hospital with their newborns made serious errors using car seats.

“I don’t expect pediatricians to go out and get certified as a car seat technician,” Dr. Hoffman said. But they should be aware of best practices so they can counsel families.

Car passenger safety is unlike other anticipatory guidance topics where parents and pediatricians look forward to kids reaching the next milestone, Dr. Hoffman said. Children lose protection as they move from rear-facing seats to forward-facing seats to booster seats to seat belts.

“One of the things that’s transformative is a better understanding of why delaying transitions in child passenger safety is so important,” he said. “It’s a completely different orientation, and I think it’s a little bit disarming for a lot of people.”

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