

By Danna Zabrovsky, The Ottawa Citizen June 19, 2010



Wafa Raslan and her son Adam, who was sitting in a properly-installed car seat, were unhurt in a car crash. Photograph by: Christopher Pike, The Ottawa Citizen

Wafa Raslan did not dare gamble on her child's safety.

Her eight-month-old son, Adam, had outgrown his car seat and needed one that fit him and the family car properly. So Raslan bought a high-end car seat and had it inspected almost immediately by S.E.A.T.S. for Kids, an Ottawa-based non-profit organization "dedicated to increasing the appropriate and correct use of child restraint systems of children in our community."

The day after the inspection, Raslan's Ford Escape was rear-ended with Adam on board. Luckily, Raslan and her son, who had been strapped into a car seat that was properly installed, were unscathed.

Motor vehicle passenger and pedestrian injuries are the leading cause of death in children and youth, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada. What's more, a 2008 report by the Canadian Pediatric Society said car seat misuse rates vary across Canada from 44 to 81 per cent.

That's why S.E.A.T.S. for Kids, which stands for "Safety, Education, Advocacy, Training, Support," offers monthly car seat clinics for parents and parents-to-be.

Four years ago, there were no expert car seat installations in Ottawa, said Deanna Lindsay, executive director of S.E.A.T.S. for Kids Coalition. Lindsay, a mother herself, had been trained to install car seats, and realized the life-saving potential of the devices. With the help of a representative from Transport Canada and anyone willing to volunteer, she started holding monthly car seat clinics around the city.

"We open online registration at 9 a.m., and at 9:06 or 9:07 we have to close it because we have 80 people," she said. Lindsay said she relies on volunteers and word of mouth to get the word out about the clinics, which are free to anyone who registers online. Most clinics take the first 60 people who sign up. Donations are appreciated. She explained some parents come to the clinics more than once as their children grow and require new car seats.

"Most people show up at our clinics pregnant or with a bucket seat, or with a newborn baby and a bucket seat," she said. "They come for infancy, then they come for rear-facing ... We help them out again." Lindsay said each customer gets about 30 minutes of education about car seats. Using a dummy in place of a real child, the inspector makes sure the parents can install the seat correctly and that the child is strapped in tightly. "If they're not breathing, then it's too tight. But that's the only way it can be too tight," Lindsay said. She said the installed car seat should not budge. "If you can pull on the car seat and have it move back and forth or side to side, it's not in properly. It needs to be one with the vehicle," Lindsay said. Another danger people overlook is projectiles -- loose items that could fly around in a collision. "A grandmother was in a collision. Her grandson was fine, except for the snow brush that clipped him across the face," Lindsay said.

"The 'Baby on Board' signs are horribly dangerous because they are sharp and they fly off in collisions."

According to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, infants weighing less than nine kilograms, or 20 pounds, must be secured in a rear-facing car seat. Toddlers weighing between nine and 18 kg, or between 20 and 40 pounds, should be placed in a forward-facing car seat. Children between 18 and 36 kg, or between 40 and 80 pounds, should be secured in booster seats.

Children can use seatbelts when they either turn eight years old, weigh 36 kg (80 pounds) or are 145 centimetres (four feet, nine inches) tall, according to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation.

The penalty for drivers who fail to secure their children, or who do so incorrectly, is a \$240 fine. Convicted offenders also receive two demerit points.

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