

New rules will change how you install car seats and how Consumer Reports rates them

Lower weight limits could mean more safety-belt installations

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New LATCH labels that go into effect in January 2014 will not only influence how you install your child seats, but they have also prompted us to revise our [car-seat Ratings](#).

Until the 2013 model year, most vehicle manufacturers indicated that parents need to make the change from installing a child seat using the lower LATCH anchors to an installation using the safety belt when the child reaches 48 lbs. or at a weight indicated by the child seat manufacturer's instruction. This guidance was based on an average child seat weight and the fact that lower LATCH anchors are designed for a limit of 65 lbs. for a *combined weight* of the child and car seat. For most seats, that meant parents and caregivers had the choice of either LATCH or seatbelt installation, depending on what provided them the most secure installation. For that reason, we have always equally weighted the LATCH and safety belt fit-to-vehicle ratings in determining a child seat's overall score.



As seats have gotten heavier and with the new LATCH labeling rule, that balance may change for those heavier seats. The labeling on the seats when the law goes into effect will indicate that the limit of a child's weight for use with LATCH will be 65 pounds minus the weight of the seat. As indicated in the most recent 2013 edition of the LATCH manual (a reference for Child Passenger Safety Technicians on LATCH use), most vehicle manufacturers have already adopted this philosophy when indicating the limits for the use of the lower LATCH anchors in their vehicles. For lighter seats, this shouldn't result in any change, but for heavier seats, it's likely that parents will need to move from LATCH to safety belt installation earlier than when a child reaches 48 lbs.

So, rather than the 50/50 balance between LATCH and seat belt installation in our Ratings, new scores will be based on the ratio of LATCH and belt use throughout the seat's life.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate is with a real example:

Our new ratings of Toddler Booster seats (also sometimes called "combination seats") include the heavy 28-pound Baby Trend Trendz Fastback seat. It has maximum harness use limit of 70 lbs. With the revised limits, that seat will only be allowed to use LATCH until a child weighs 37 lbs. (65 lbs. minus 28 lbs. = 37 lbs.), after which the seat must be changed to a safety belt installation. That results in a transition to belt use 11 lbs. sooner than may have previously been the case. In this example, we will now give less scoring weight in our fit-to-vehicle assessment with LATCH than with the safety belt rather than the 50/50 balance we had previously used.

For some seats there may be no change, but for others such as the Baby Trend, it may result in less emphasis on LATCH and more focus on safety belt installation. This will lead to lower overall scores for seats that don't fare as well for safety belt installation as they do for LATCH.

Overall we've expressed our disappointment in the change in LATCH labeling because we are fans of LATCH. We are often able to achieve more secure installations using LATCH in our fit-to-vehicle assessments and would prefer to see the overall limits of those anchors increased to allow for longer use. But despite our criticisms of the new law, it appears that the changes will move forward. Starting next year, seats will have new labels to show how big a child can be for LATCH use and our Ratings will reflect this revised guidance.

We expect to adopt a similar philosophy to our Ratings of convertible and all-in-one seats as soon as those [Ratings](#) are updated.

Learn more about the new car seat LATCH rules.

—Jennifer Stockburger

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