

The time has come for child seats on airplanes

By Bill McGee, special for USA TODAY



Behind the Screen

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By Mark Wilson, Getty Images

The need to increase educational efforts on the dangers that lap children face on flights is greater than ever; thankfully, some agencies in the aviation industry are doing just that.

As I described in [last month's column](#), my service on the U.S.

Department of Transportation's [Future of Aviation Advisory Committee](#) included lively discussions on a host of issues. But the topic of aviation safety was paramount.

The issue of child safety restraints was the 23rd and final [recommendation we put forth](#) to DOT Secretary Raymond LaHood. This proposal directs the Secretary to:

1. Utilize the full resources of his office to continuously educate the flying public about the dangers of flying with lap children;
2. Update the economic and safety data concerning families traveling with small children, including incidents and accidents involving injuries and deaths;
3. Based on the information provided by these findings, the Secretary

should take necessary action, which may include a rulemaking or other appropriate next steps.

At a minimum, there should be greater education on this issue from the [Federal Aviation Administration](#) and the airline industry, and obviously that educational effort needs to be continuous since the pool of new parents is constantly evolving. However, when I raised this issue before the FAAC (on behalf of Consumers Union), we lobbied for more than education, and instead requested the [FAA](#) mandate that all lap kids be properly secured.

Physics 101

Unfortunately, far too many parents don't understand that this issue is all about physics. In October, [Boeing](#) organized a meeting with the nation's best experts on this topic: representatives from the FAA, DOT, [National Transportation Safety Board](#), the Air Transport Association, the [Association of Flight Attendants](#), Boeing and the airlines. I opened by asking a simple question: Is there any reputable source—from government, industry or academia—that advocates lap children are as safe or safer than children secured in proper restraint systems? The answer was no.

This point truly cannot be overstated. Consider that from a safety perspective there are no pending studies, no suspect science, no warring camps. The evidence is overwhelming and conclusive that lap children are at greater

risk of injury and death, not only during catastrophic events but even at other times, such as during routine turbulence. As one flight attendant testified, at certain intervals crewmembers are required to secure all loose cabin items, from electronic devices to coffee pots. Everything, that is, except the smallest and most vulnerable passengers.

And make no mistake: No matter how much you love that little one, the laws of physics make it impossible for you to protect an infant or small child under such tremendous g-forces. That's a scientific fact. Most parents would not think of violating the laws that exist in all 50 states to secure babies in car seats, yet the forces in commercial aircraft at high altitudes are many times greater. Simply put, no one can argue that a lap child is not at risk.

Now, can purchasing a seat for an infant pose a financial hardship for some families? No question. It's a real concern. But it's important to separate the safety issues from the economic.

In fact, the economic issue has become a safety issue for the FAA. The [NTSB](#) has long advocated for a ban on lap children, but the FAA has refused because of what it terms "diversion," the possibility that families that cannot afford to purchase a seat for kids under 2 will instead elect to drive, and driving is statistically more dangerous than flying, so theoretically more children will be at risk. (Of course, the same argument could be made for any potential trip, regardless of the traveler's age.)

Speaking directly to the NTSB and FAA staff members that advocate opposing views on this topic deepened my respect for both sides. It's clear that many dedicated and caring officials in both organizations are sincere in their contrary beliefs. But I believe the current FAA policy is the wrong course and ALL children should be properly secured on all U.S. commercial flights. Other safety advocates also argue there are problems with the diversion theory, and that's why the FAAC asked the DOT to update its research on this topic.

Spreading the word

I addressed this topic as "[Why you should never fly with a child in your lap](#)" back in 2008. And what was true then is just as true now.

To its credit, during the holiday season, the DOT increased its [educational efforts](#) in this area. And in December, the FAA revamped the "[Child Safety on Airplanes](#)" page on its site; [a helpful brochure](#) is available as well.

The NTSB has been ramping up its educational endeavors as well. In December, I attended an NTSB forum that focused on [child passenger safety](#). And last week, the NTSB launched a [Child and Youth Transportation Safety Initiative](#) to enhance education.

Challenges to overcome

Even if a ban on lap kids was enacted tomorrow, it's clear there would be a transition period, and potential problems would need to be addressed. Among them:

- **Cost.** Last week I watched an ill-informed news report broadcast by a major television network that speculated airlines could add to their list of ancillary fees in 2011 by charging for infants, yet there was no mention whatsoever of the safety component. Since millions of airline passengers already are quite fed up with nickel-and-diming, it

would be a grave mistake to view such a safety initiative as just one more carrier revenue stream. The airline industry could serve the public good, improve customer relations, and still increase revenues by charging a nominal fee for infant seating. Southwest, for example, has long offered [infant fares](#) and hopefully other carriers would follow suit if a lap child ban were instated.

- **Compatibility.** The good news is there is much greater compatibility between automobile and airplane safety restraints than there was even a decade ago; overwhelmingly most can be used for dual purposes. The bad news is "much greater" is not the same as universal (particularly on some regional aircraft). This issue was exemplified just last week when a mother found her infant seat was [incompatible with a United Airlines aircraft](#) in San Francisco. There are still hurdles, both with compatibility and with communication.

- **Convenience.** New policies bring confusion, and many travelers will need to be educated. The fight for overhead bin space that evolved from checked baggage fees has led to many boarding delays, and—let's face it—securing child safety restraints could add to the confusion in the short term. What's more, many parents have spoken out about the inconvenience of schlepping a safety seat through airport security. That's why the need to increase educational efforts is greater than ever; this is a critical issue that far too many parents and caregivers unknowingly view merely as an annoyance. It's not—it's quite literally life and death.