



Travel Gear Review: CARES Child Restraint System

On August 14, 2006, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) approved the first ever alternative child restraint system called [CARES](#), a harness-type device that attaches to the airplane seat's regular seatbelt. CARES is designed to be used as an alternative to a car seat or as a supplement to adult lap belts for children ages 2-4 who weigh between 22 and 44 pounds. This is the only alternative device approved for use during an entire flight including take-off and landing. (As compared to something like the Baby B'Air Vest that is only approved for use for lap-held children during flight, but NOT during take-off and landing.) (For more information on FAA child restraint regulations, see [Unraveling the Confusion - FAA Child Restraint Rules](#), below.)

On recent trips, both Jennifer and I had the opportunity to test out the system on our sons. Ryan is three and weighs 38 pounds; Alexander is two and weighs in at 35 pounds.

My first impression of CARES was, "Is that it?" as my friend handed me a small blue bag. Weighing in at just one pound (significantly less than our Britax Roundabout car seat!), CARES at first glance hardly appears, well, reassuring. But upon closer examination, I found the straps to be well made and very sturdy. In fact, CARES is manufactured by Amsafe Aviation, the largest manufacturer of aviation seatbelts and pilot restraint systems in the world. CARES is made of the same material as your own seatbelt.

The CARES consists of one main loop that goes around the back of the seat (under the tray table in the back of the seat) and then is positioned just above your child's shoulders (the red strap in the illustration below). It has two, vertical black straps that cross over each shoulder and connect to the airplane's seatbelt (blue) at the bottom by threading the seat belt through loops in the ends of the black straps. Those two straps also buckle in the middle across the chest, creating a harness similar to that of a car seat.



CARES installed in a airplane seat

Jennifer noted that her CARES system came with an installation DVD to explain the proper way to use it. She suggests you take the time to watch it. (If you borrow a CARES from a friend, be sure to ask for the DVD.) The four-minute-long DVD does a good job of showing the relatively simple installation, which is really helpful to know for your first flight with CARES.

The first segment of our flight was from Hartford to Charlotte and thanks to some soon-to-expire frequent flier miles, we had upgraded to first class for this leg of the trip.

CARES was clearly not designed with first class seats in mind, as it was very difficult to maneuver the main loop over the top of the seat. However, even with this added degree of difficulty, my husband powered it down and had Ryan strapped in thoroughly in under three minutes. Ryan loved being able to sit in a seat "just like Daddy's!"

It was not long after take-off that we noticed the other issue with CARES. Unlike a car seat, which has straps that go between your child's legs to keep them upright in the seat, the CARES has no crotch strap. With nothing between his legs to keep him sitting upright in the seat, Ryan was soon sliding down and out from under the straps. While Ryan is an experienced traveler and not particularly squirmy on flights, we did have to "scooch" him up periodically to keep him comfortable. [Dave adds: The lack of a crotch strap is a safety concern. While it's no worse than using any adult lap or lap-and-shoulder belt with small children, at that size a crotch strap is still preferable.]

When we reached Charlotte, the CARES was again slightly difficult to maneuver up and off the wider first-class seat, but we still had it uninstalled in under a minute. Our connecting flight to Savannah was on a much smaller commuter plane. With those coach-sized seats, the CARES was truly easy to install.

Jennifer's experience with the CARES was on a Spirit Air flight to Orlando (and back). She had no problem installing the CARES on a coach-class seat, but she discovered the same tendency for Alexander to slide down in the seat. Alexander tends to be very



Alexander in his CARES

squirmy, but he did surprisingly well at staying in his seat and not fighting against the restraint. On the return flight, Jennifer had some troubles with installation -- Alexander seemed less comfortable with the straps and had a greater tendency to slip down. She lowered the horizontal strap so it was right at his shoulder height, which made a big difference (this is the manufacturer-recommended position). Alexander really enjoyed being able to sit between Mom and Dad thanks to the CARES - in his previous safety seat used on plane trips (a [Sit 'n' Stroll](#)) he was required to take the window seat for safety reasons. Also thanks to the CARES, Alexander had more leg room and Jennifer didn't need to constantly remind him not to kick the seat in front of him (or apologize to its occupants).

The CARES is a little pricey at \$75, so if your child is at the upper end of the age or weight range or if you travel infrequently, the investment may not be worthwhile for your family. However in my opinion, the peace of mind that comes from knowing that Ryan is safer during in-flight turbulence or in the event of a catastrophe combined with the convenience and ease of use makes this a no-brainer for our family. Jennifer agrees and is pleased with the CARES. You can get more information on CARES at <http://www.kidsflysafe.com>.

Unraveling the Confusion - FAA Child Restraint Rules

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) policies regarding child safety generate many questions from our readers. The most confusing (and troublesome) policy regards the lap-carrying of children under two years of age. Parents have the option of lap-carrying their infant, rather than purchase a seat. While even the FAA does not recommend parents do this, the agency is unwilling to outlaw the practice. We, the FAA, National Transportation Safety Board, and every safety organization that has taken a

position on the issue encourage parents to purchase a seat and to use an approved Child Restraint System. For children 20lbs. and under, this means a rear-facing car seat that is marked "FAA Approved in Accordance with 14CFR 21.305(d), Approved for Aircraft Use Only" -- not just any car seat will do. For children aged two and above,, parents are required to purchase a seat on the plane. While the FAA permits those children to be restrained by standard lap belts, a Child Restraint System provides superior protection for children up to 40/44lbs. For children weighing 20-40lbs., a front-facing, FAA-approved car seat is acceptable, and for children weighing 22-44lbs., a CARES belt system is approved. Over 40/44 lbs., the FAA recommends using the regular lap belt provided by the airlines.

For more information on FAA regulations, visit http://www.faa.gov/passengers/fly_children/crs/

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