



# NHTSA

NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION

## Child Car Safety

*Exploratory Research*

*August 8, 2023*

# Research Purpose and Objectives

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**The purpose of this study is to obtain insights that will help The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Ad Council identify how they might evolve their Child Car Safety campaign to best reach and motivate parents/caregivers of children ages 0-14 to ensure their child is properly secured.**

## **Research Objectives:**

- To gain an understanding of the following:
  - The current mindset of parents/caregivers around their priorities and values in life
  - Their parenting approach (e.g., what do they currently value or are concerned about when it comes to their kids, what is their parenting style, what are their driving behaviors)
  - Knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and barriers when it comes to child car seat safety
  - How resonant, relevant, and motivating current creative is
  - Potential new messaging ways-in for the campaign

# Research Configuration & Methodology

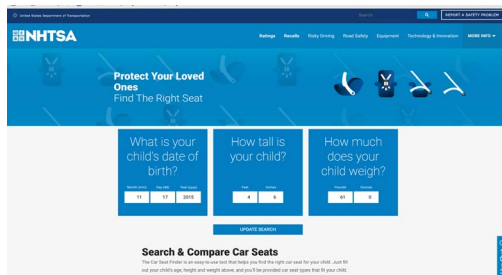
## Overview

- Total of 12 Virtual Focus Groups and 18 Virtual In-Depth Interviews (IDIs)
- Nationwide (including rural representation)
- Groups will last approximately 90 minutes each (depending on stimuli)
- IDIs will last 45 minutes (IDIs were "fresh" recruits, separate from focus groups)
- Seated 5 per group

Focus Groups	Groups	IDIs	Total (Focus Groups and IDIs)
Parents/Caregivers of 0–3-years-old (GenPop)	1	2	3
Parents/Caregivers of 0–3-years-old (Spanish)	1	2	3
Parents/Caregivers of 4-6-years-old (GenPop)	2	3	5
Parents/Caregivers of 4-6-years-old (Spanish)	2	2	4
Parents/Caregivers of 7–10-years-old (GenPop)	2	3	5
Parents/Caregivers of 7–10-years-old (Spanish)	2	2	4
Parents/Caregivers of 11–14-years-old (GenPop)	1	2	3
Parents/Caregivers of 11–14-years-old (Spanish)	1	2	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>30</b>

# Concepts Tested (English/Spanish)

## NHTSA Website



Shown to all respondents

## "I Come Correct"



Shown to parents of children ages 0-6 yrs

## "Hustle"



Shown to parents of children ages 7-14 yrs

# Executive Summary

# This study confirmed the continued need to raise awareness around ensuring children are in the correct car seat

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## Parents need and want clear guidance on when to transition to the next car seat

- **The right car seat is not a priority:** Most parents already feel confident about their seat choice for their child, so having the right car seat is not considered a top safety priority by most parents, as most focus on safe driving and buckling up.
- **Multiple factors influence desire to transition car seats:** Physical, emotional, functional, and social cues trigger parents to consider a transition (e.g., fit, child's comfort, peer pressure from kids and other parents).
- **Parents experience cognitive dissonance as they contemplate child's safety:** Parents are increasingly concerned about their child's safety as they transition – yet as they transition, they rely more on non-expert sources and their own instincts to inform these transitions.
- **There is a need for definitive information:** While it is not difficult to find information, challenges exist with finding definitive information, which creates confusion.
- **Spanish-dominant Hispanics need more information:** Spanish-speaking participants appear more lenient about car safety, and therefore need more information.

### Opportunities for future overall strategy:

- There is a need to continue to emphasize the message about having the 'right car seat' in all messaging/channels.
- Highlight the 'right car seat' tool prominently in messaging to drive home message.
- Ensure messaging is in both Spanish and English – in particular, there is an opportunity to build greater awareness among Spanish speaking Hispanics.

# The NHTSA website strongly resonates with respondents

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## Reactions

Reactions to the NHTSA website are overall very positive - it is perceived as credible, trustworthy, easy to navigate, and emotionally resonates with many.

Those who have their child in the correct car seat feel validated and reassured. Those who didn't have the child in the correct car seat experience a sense of anxiety and self-doubt, which in turn motivates them to seek more information about car seat safety for their children.

However, some respondents, particularly in the General Market, have questions about the car seat recommendations and desire more insight into the rationale behind them.

Spanish-speaking participants face challenges in translating measurements from the metric system to the imperial system (lbs./inches) and finding the link to the Spanish site proved to be difficult for some users.

## Opportunities for NHTSA

To increase credibility, provide links to studies or resources that support the sites rationale for car seat recommendations.

Add imagery of booster with backseat to minimize confusion.

Make link to Spanish site more visible - many Spanish speakers indicated they would welcome the site in Spanish, but it was not evident it was available in Spanish.

In the Spanish site, offer the option to enter measurements using the metric system.

# Reactions to creative concepts (“I Come Correct” and “Hustle”) are well-received

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## Reactions

Reactions to both concepts are positive - they are perceived to be relevant and highly relatable, and the message of car safety comes through.

However, several perceive car safety message to be more about buckling up than about ensuring their children are in the right car seat.

Call to action to go the NHTSA website comes through clearly.

For a few respondents, “Hustle” is perceived as too chaotic - it is not clear what message was about until the end.

## Opportunities for NHTSA

Consider emphasizing more the message that it is **about having the ‘right seat,’ not about ‘buckling up’**.

For future creative, consider the balance of realistic scenes and the main message coming in earlier to avoid potentially overwhelming audiences and further drive home the importance of having the right car seat.



# Key Findings

# Parenting styles and concerns vary by age – and what they are strict about changes as well

## Parenting Styles & Concerns Across Age Groups

When children are young, parents' concerns focus on physical safety. As children grow, safety concerns are more focused on external factors such as social media/online and other external threats, which is consistent with previous research.

The presence of older children is also a factor as some mention being more relaxed with their younger children than when they were new parents with their older children.

Spanish-speaking parents tend to be more strict than General Market parents regarding school, manners, discipline, social media, and nutrition, especially as their children reached four years of age and beyond.

	Ages 0-3	Ages 4-6	Ages 7-10	Ages 11-14
<b>Parenting Styles</b>	More protective, cautious, parenting style - concerned mainly about physical safety	Mix of oversight and free-range parenting - allow exploration with strong parent oversight	Allowing more freedom and independence - but becoming stricter about education, nutrition, and social media  Several Spanish speaking respondents indicate becoming stricter with education, discipline, and manners	Letting kids gain trust and responsibility, letting go of oversight with grades (a little); stricter around social media
<b>Concerns</b>	Concerns about physical injuries, food safety, limiting video/screen time, child abductions	Concerns about injuries, getting hit by cars when playing outside, abductions, school safety	Concerns about negative influences - peers, social media, online bullying, online gaming, screen time, strangers reaching out through social media	Concerns about technology, social media, outside influences, getting enough exercise

# Car safety concerns also vary across age groups; However, having the right car seat is not perceived to be a key concern

Consistent with previous research, as kids grow and transition into less protective car seats, concern about keeping children buckled also grows.

However, having the right car seat is not a key concern, as most believe their kids are in the appropriate car seat for their age.

This is likely due to having a sense of overconfidence with car seats, as previous research has shown.

*“It’s not a good driving experience because he doesn’t like to be buckled up in his seat. So he’s learned to unbuckle the seatbelt, get out his seat, and climb to the front seat.” (Parent of 4-6 year old).*

## Types of restraints used & car safety concerns

	Ages 0-3 yrs	Ages 4-6 yrs	Ages 7-10 yrs	Ages 11-14 yrs
<b>Type of restraints used</b>	Most have children in rear-facing car seats, some in forward facing	Most have children in forward facing car seats	Most have children in boosters	Most have children in adult seat belts
<b>Car safety concerns</b>	<p>Proper car seat installation and use of rear-facing infant seats</p> <p>Ensuring tight fit of harness straps</p> <p>Ease of getting in and out of car seat</p> <p>Ability to see/reach child while driving</p> <p>Adequate padding/cushioning in car seat</p> <p>Child comfort</p>	<p>Proper installation and use of forward-facing seats and new boosters</p> <p>Transitioning from 5-point harness to booster</p> <p>Child comfort</p>	<p>Proper belt positioning with boosters (especially on long trips)</p> <p>Kids unbuckling seat belts</p> <p>Peer pressure to not use booster</p> <p>Less protected than with forward facing car seat</p>	<p>Lap/shoulder belts used properly</p> <p>Belts not worn too loosely</p> <p>Kids riding in front seat - airbag safety</p> <p>Resistance to using seat belts</p> <p>Less protected</p> <p>Uncomfortable belt around the shoulder—need for extra padding</p>

## Additionally, Spanish-speaking parents appear to be more lenient with their children's car safety

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Spanish-speaking participants appear to be more lenient, allowing their children to ride unbuckled or loosely buckled over longer distances for comfort. These parents are also more likely to transition their children into the next car seat based on their child's comfort.

This suggests that limited awareness of car safety norms in their home countries (where seatbelt laws are inconsistent), and a cultural perception of invincibility plays a role in shaping these behaviors.

This stems from a prevailing cultural inclination to assume that “nothing will ever go wrong”.

This study underscores the significant need to enhance awareness across demographics, stressing that child car safety is not only about using seat belts, but also includes selecting the correct car seat.

Furthermore, the study identifies a specific need to heighten awareness among Spanish-speaking audiences about the importance of maintaining children's secure fastening in their car seats.

While parents report consulting various resources to inform their transition, many parents ultimately rely on their 'gut feeling' to make a final decision about transitioning their child.

Parents use various sources to inform their decision on transitioning their child to the next car seat.

- Government websites (mainly to comply with the law—less so to ensure child safety)
- Fire and police departments (for help on initial installation)
- Pediatricians
- Google searches, the car seat manual, advice from friends and family, and their own intuition

**Spanish-speaking participants tend to rely more on word-of-mouth information.** They are less familiar with official sources and car seat laws. Some participants mentioned searching for information in both English and Spanish.

Interestingly, some felt that English resources were more credible and preferred to translate English content into Spanish.

The usage of police and fire departments as resources was less common among Spanish-speakers, primarily due to a lack of knowledge about these options.

For those who are aware, language barriers and embarrassment hindered their utilization of these resources.

## Sources of information



### Issue Experts

State websites  
Pediatrician  
CHP (a few)  
Police/Fire Dept (a few)  
DMV (a few)  
NHTSA (a few)



### Online/ Social Media

Google Searches  
YouTube  
FB Mom/Baby Groups  
Social Media (IG, TikTok)  
Consumer Reports  
Amazon customer reviews



### Friends/Family

Parents with similar aged or older children  
Family (very common among Hispanics)



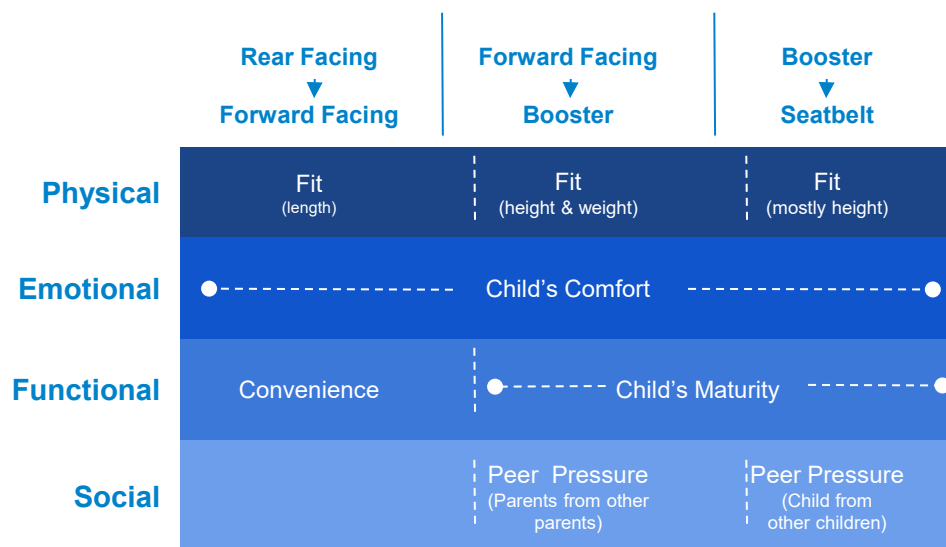
### Manufacturer/ Product

Manufacturer site  
Product Manual

# In the absence of clear guidance, parents often rely on physical, emotional, and social cues to transition their children to the next car seat

- **Parents often transition their child to a forward-facing seat** when they notice their child is uncomfortable or getting too big for the car seat, even if the child is younger than the recommended age to transition to a forward-facing seat. Convenience is also a factor as some parents indicated it is much easier to interact with and to take child and in and out of a forward-facing car seat.
- **For moving to a booster seat**, child's behavior like staying buckled and peer influence (among parents seeing other kids in a booster) are additional considerations.
- **Transition to an adult seatbelt** is triggered by the child's weight, height, and/or objections to using a booster. Some parents also allow front seating if the child is above-average sized.

## Cues that trigger car seat transitions



*Transitioning to a booster or seat belt can be emotionally difficult for many parents as they may worry their child lacks any protection, especially if their child is small for their age or emotionally-mature as does not stay buckled.*

*"He said he didn't want to use the booster seat because he's a big boy..children want to do what their friends do." (Parent, 7-10 yrs)*

*"I think eventually he was getting really tall so we did switch him around and we didn't switch Marco. He was, I think like almost not quite two and a half." (Parent, 4-6 yrs)*

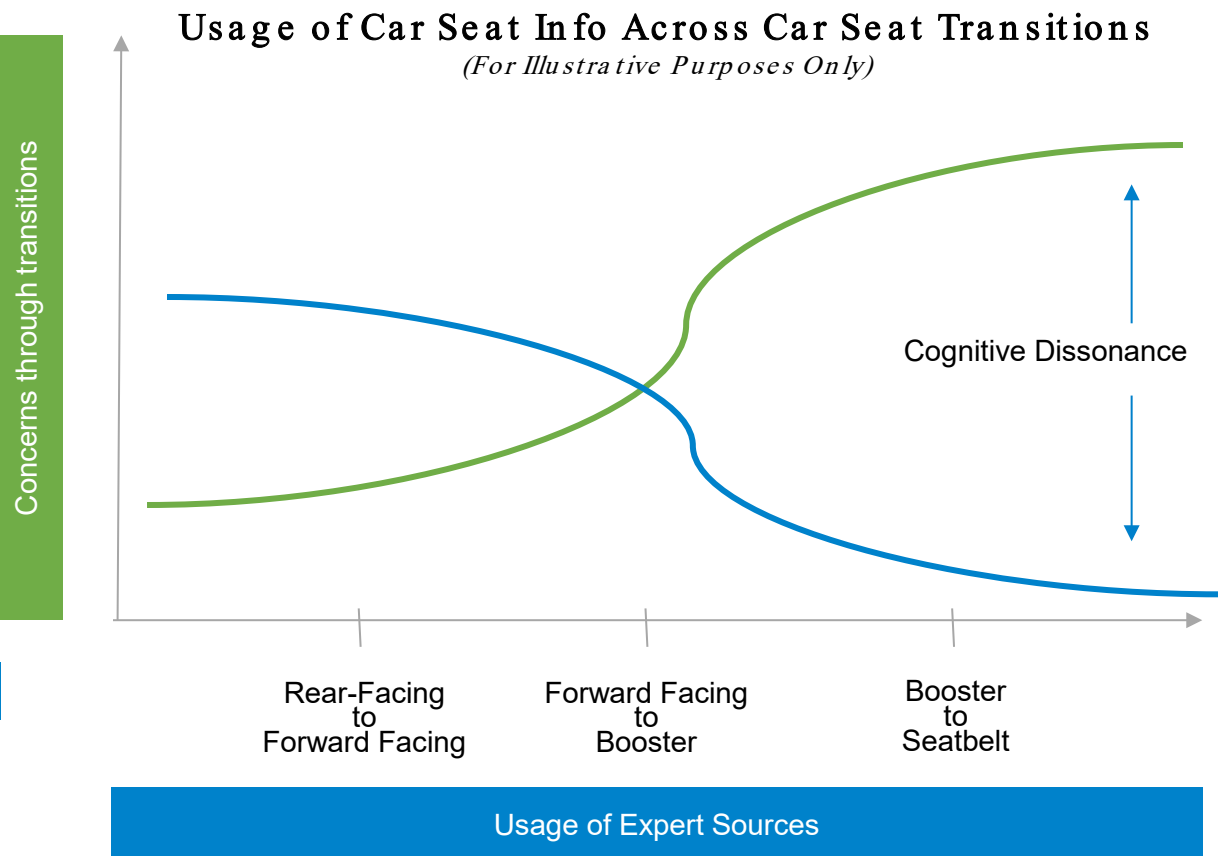
*"It's definitely harder to transition from booster to a regular car seat because [he] was still in a restraint, now it's just the seatbelt. So I think I was definitely more scared with change from booster to car seat." (Parent, 11-14 yrs)*

# As kids get older, parents become more concerned with seat belt safety, yet they are less likely to seek expert advice

There is an opportunity to increase awareness of the importance of continuing to rely on authoritative sources throughout kids' entire car seat transition process

Usage of Expert Sources

Concerns about car safety through transitions



# Parents seek information about car seat transitions; However, because information is often confusing or conflicting, they will rely on their instincts when deciding car seat transitions

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## Conflicting Information

Several respondents indicate they hear conflicting information from government sites, pediatricians and people, and therefore will end up relying on their own instinct when deciding when to transition their child to the next car seat.



## Credibility of Sources

Most respondents mention one of the first things they have done when considering a transition is to google for articles about the topic.

If they are not government sites, many do not recall the sources nor do they question their credibility, but perception among some is that if the same information pops up in their search, and it aligns with what they hear from friends, family and other sources then it must be credible.



## Confusing Information

Several respondents also find the information confusing. For example, which criteria is more important (age, height or weight) and how all these are factor into safety recommendations as each child is unique.

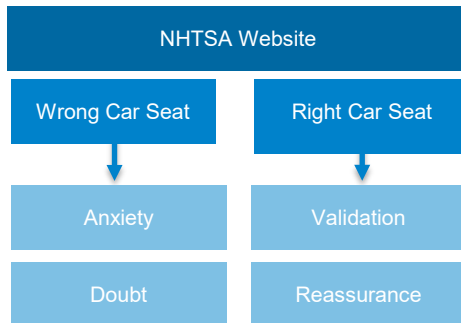
Additionally, several feel the child's maturity (e.g., ability to understand to stay buckled) is not factored into the information, which makes some question their decision to transition their children.

*[Decision to transition to forward facing car seat] was due to gut feeling, because I did not know right from wrong, and I was getting conflicting information." (Mom, 0-3 yrs)*



# Reactions to Stimuli

# Reactions to the NHTSA website are overall very positive - it is credible, trustworthy, and resonates emotionally



*"I'm glad I made the right decision so I feel like, yeah, I'm confident I had it. I was confident that it was going to be that." (Parent, 11-14 yrs)*

*"I'm going to go with my gut on it just because it doesn't make sense to just put a four-year-old into a booster." (Parent, 4-6 yrs)*

*"I trust [the results] in the sense that... they're good for... generic results, but I think you should still do your own research... It's not the be-all and end-all." (Parent, 0-3 yrs)*

## Pros

- The site is highly regarded as credible and trustworthy, especially among Spanish-speakers, given that it is from a government source.
- Respondents appreciate the comprehensive consideration of height, age, and weight in the provided information.
- The site is commended for its user-friendly navigation, concise presentation, and reliability, offering clear and accurate guidance.
- It has an emotional impact and serves as a source of motivation for many parents.
- Those who have their child in the correct car seat feel validated and reassured, while those who don't experience a sense of anxiety and self-doubt, which in turn motivates them to seek further knowledge about car seat safety for their children.
- Some respondents are surprised by the results they discovered.
- Especially among Spanish speakers, there was a noticeable increase in their openness to the site's messages and suggestions.

# The site faces a few challenges, particularly with Spanish-speaking parents who are accustomed to the metric system and for some who read the tool as generic

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## Challenges

- While the site is generally perceived as credible, some respondents, particularly in the General Market, have questions about the car seat recommendations and desire more insight into the rationale behind them.
- Some parents, unaware of their child's height, may be inclined to abandon the site due to the potential measurement requirement.
- Spanish-speaking participants face challenges in translating measurements from the metric system to the imperial system (lbs./inches).
- Certain respondents, especially among the General Market, feel the recommendations are overly generic and do not account for the child's maturity level or the specific needs of the parents, particularly when transitioning to a booster or seat belt. In such cases, they feel the need to still rely on their own intuition despite the recommendations.
- The absence of imagery featuring a booster with a backseat leads to confusion among some users.
- Finding the link to the Spanish site proves to be difficult for some users.

## Opportunities for Improvement:

- To increase credibility, provide links to studies or resources that support the sites rationale for car seat recommendations.
- Add imagery of booster with backseat to minimize confusion.
- Make link to Spanish site more visible - many Spanish speakers indicate they would welcome the site in Spanish, but it was not evident it was available in Spanish.
- In the Spanish site, offer the option to enter measurements using the metric system.

# Ads continue to resonate with parents, and many appreciate the humor and real-life scenarios

*However, opportunities exist to strengthen the delivery of the main message in future creative as several understand the car safety message to be about buckling up vs. ensuring they had the right car seat for their child*

Concept	Pros	Challenges	Considerations for future creative
<b>“I Come Correct” (0-6yrs)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concept is perceived to be humorous.</li> <li>• Respondents strongly relate to scenario - many see themselves in the ad.</li> <li>• Message that it is important to focus on most important things (car seat safety) resonates.</li> <li>• Many are motivated to check out the website and many noticed the call to action at the end.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While message of car seat safety and reference to the website comes through, several respondents perceive ad to be about buckling up more than about having the right car-seat.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider emphasizing more the message that call to action is about having the ‘right seat’ earlier on in the ad.</li> </ul>
<b>“Hustle” (7-14 yrs)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respondents perceive ad to be humorous yet relevant - and many can see themselves in the ad.</li> <li>• Message to focus on most important things, like car safety comes through.</li> <li>• Most notice website and call to action at the end.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Message of having the right seat struggles to come through.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show more of the ‘Right Seat Tool’ in the ad so parents can see more explicitly how the tool can help them.</li> </ul>

# In Summary

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## Key Insights:

**Car Seat Perception:** The importance of having the right car seat is not a key safety concern because parents are overconfident that their child is in the right car seat. Parents mainly prioritize safe driving and seat belt use when it comes to safety.

**Transition Triggers:** Parents are triggered to switch car seats based on fit, child's comfort, and both child and peer influence.

**Safety Concern vs. Source Reliability:** As concerns grow during seat transitions, parents increasingly turn to non-expert advice and their own instincts to make those decisions.

**Information Clarity:** Although car safety information is available, finding consistent guidance can be challenging, leading to confusion.

**Cultural Differences:** Spanish-speaking parents have a more relaxed attitude toward car safety and need more information to change perceptions.

**Ad Feedback:** *'Hustle'* and *'I Come Correct'* are well-received due to their humor and relatability. However, the main message may get overshadowed at times.

**NHTSA Website Feedback:** While the website is credible and a welcomed resource, some general market consumers question the recommendations. There's also a need for improved accessibility for Spanish-speaking parents, especially those more familiar with the metric system.

## Potential Considerations for Future Creative:

**Awareness Emphasis:** There is a continued need for campaign to stress the importance of ensuring the correct car seat choice for children.

**Clear Guidance Needed:** Parents need definitive guidelines on transitioning car seats. Consistently highlight the message of the 'right car seat', especially for older children, across all platforms.

**Bilingual Messaging:** Continue to offer content in Spanish and English. There's an opportunity to heighten awareness among Spanish-speaking Hispanics who may be more relaxed when it comes to car safety.

**Future Creative:** In future creative, ensure 'Right Seat Tool' is prominently placed so parents can see how it can help them. Also, introduce the main message earlier in the ad to reinforce the key message and call to action.

**Future Creative:** Consider playing up the idea of *relying on experts such as NHTSA* to ensure their child is in the right car seat. This will likely resonate strongly with Hispanics who welcome expert advice and want to feel secure in their choice of proper car seat.

**Website:** Increase the website's credibility by linking to additional resources that provide a rationale for the recommendations. For Spanish speakers, offer the option to enter measurements using the metric system and make link to Spanish site more visible.

Thank you!

# Appendix

# Other opportunities to drive home message about the 'right car seat'

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*Parents in this study provided some ideas on how to best drive home the 'right car seat' message*

## Some ideas include:

- Include posts/ads on social media apps such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook.
- Include more specific examples in the ad to make it clear it is about having the 'right car seat'.
- Have a segment in the news, include a link in the local new app.
- Have an app with reminders/alerts when kids reached certain ages to remind parents to check the NHTSA site to ensure their child was still in the correct car seat.





# Qualification Criteria

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## Qualification Criteria

- Parents/guardians of children 0 to 14
- Must be 18+ years of age
- Mix race/ethnicity
- Target 50/50 gender split
- Mix levels of education
- Mix household income, marital status, U.S. regions, urbanicity (including rural representation)
- Must drive their children 3 times a week or more
- Must hold a valid US drivers license
- General Market interviews: Must speak fluent English
- Spanish-interviews: Must speak fluent Spanish; Mix of country of birth; Arrived in U.S. 17+