Kids in cars less protected than they should be

By ACSH Staff — August 7, 2012

Last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued new Guidelines for Child Passenger Safety. These include the recommendation that kids remain in a rear-facing car seat until at least the age of two, and in booster seats until they reach about 57 tall, the average height of an 11-year-old. Though such protective measures may seem stringent to some, it’s important for parents to remember that, in the U.S., motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for kids older than three and are responsible for sending over 140,000 children to the emergency room each year.

That’s why the results of a recent study [1], published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, are especially troubling. Researchers from C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, found that fewer than 2 percent of kids use a booster seat after age seven, and many ages six and over sit in the front seat, even though they should remain in the back until the age of 13.

The results were derived from a survey by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which collected data for three years prior to the AAP’s updated guidelines. Researchers recorded various factors including age, child restraint type and seat row, adult and child race and gender, and driver restraint use as cars with child passengers pulled up to a variety of sites, such as gas stations, fast food restaurants, and child care centers.

Overall, the findings showed that child safety seat use declined with age. In addition, within each age group, minority children exhibited lower proportions of age-appropriate restraint use, compared to white children.

Our findings demonstrate that not all children have been reached equally by community-based public education campaigns and the passage of child safety seat laws in 48 states, says co-author Dr. Michelle L. Macy.

ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan shares this perspective: We frequently read about or see on the news various nonsensical threats to children’s health, such as pesticides on produce and chemicals in plastic, or the misguided fears of vaccines. Yet, in order to actually save the lives of toddlers and schoolchildren,” she says, “simple attention to car safety is being widely ignored. Motor vehicle accidents kill more children than cancer, heart disease, and infections combined, yet our kids are still not being adequately protected. Public health educators, both governmental and private, need to do much more on this crucial subject.