

## Cars should be made safer for children

Promising technologies are emerging, or exist, to make vehicles safer for children. Consumers Union is pressing the auto industry, Congress, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to give serious consideration to them in three particular areas:

**Backup warning devices.** These systems, which include sensor and camera models, are designed to alert drivers when there is an obstacle behind their vehicle so that they don't back over it. CU thinks that some of the devices might have promise, especially since big vehicles such as pickup trucks and sport-utility vehicles are proliferating and, as our testing has found, the rear blind spot for their drivers is substantial.

Last year at least 58 children died when they were backed over by a vehicle, often a parent's or relative's car, according to Kids and Cars, a nonprofit safety organization. That number could be higher, but no official data are available because NHTSA doesn't track those incidents.

NHTSA should gather data that would add to the understanding of how children are injured or killed in accidents involving vehicles. The government should test

technologies expressly marketed as backup safety devices and provide consumers with information about them. We think the best of those technologies should be made standard in pickups and SUVs, for starters.

Proposed legislation in the Senate would require NHTSA to gather data on accidents involving children in and around vehicles and to begin testing backup warning devices. Several House members are expected to introduce similar legislation.

**Power-window devices.** Last year four children were strangled by power windows that did not have lever-type switches or auto-reverse sensors to stop them from closing when they hit an obstacle such as an arm or neck, according to Kids and Cars. The culprits include switches that raise the window when they are depressed, as by a child's knee or foot.

Those switches are found primarily in cars from the Big Three automakers—DaimlerChrysler, Ford, and General Motors. Most imports to the U.S. and a few U.S. models have the safer, lever-type switch, which must be pulled up to raise the window. Those switches, together with auto-reverse sensors (already available

in some cars), would prevent deaths and injuries. Consumers Union is urging Congress and NHTSA to require the safer power-window systems in all vehicles.

**Child car seats.** Current car-seat technology needs renewed attention from car-seat manufacturers and automakers. CONSUMER REPORTS recently tested 25 car seats equipped with the federally required LATCH (Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children) system, which is supposed to make the seats simpler to install. We found that LATCH connectors on several models made proper installation difficult at best. When the fit is poor, the child is not fully protected.

In addition, the hooks and anchors in numerous vehicles can be difficult to use when installing a car seat, our ongoing vehicle tests have shown. CU urges car and car-seat makers to work to make the use of LATCH connections easier.

### what you can do

To learn more about the proposed car-safety legislation, visit the Consumers Union public-policy Web site at [www.consumersunion.org](http://www.consumersunion.org).

### then & now number, please

1984



Until AT&T's breakup in the early 1980s, most Americans had known only Bell System telephones. So when we tested phones in 1984, buying your own was a new experience. Consumers faced unfamiliar designs and features on the nearly 200 brands rushed to market. There were folding phones and Mickey Mouse phones, ringer-volume control and redial. But you couldn't talk and walk very far; most Americans were still tethered by a cord to their phone's base.

Today, about four homes in five have a cordless phone. Many new models can support two or more handsets or two phone lines and have a built-in answering machine and a base speakerphone.

One throwback: Most of today's cordless phones still offer a Pulse setting, which simulates the dialing clicks of a rotary phone.

2003

