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A Fatal Contradiction

Child safety in cars: A wide gulf has developed between technology and legislation

Children up to four years of age would be better protected in cars if they travelled rearward-facing in a suitable child restraint, rather than forward-facing as is the usual practice in most of Europe. Suitable seats are widely used in the Nordic countries, but are not readily available in the rest of Europe. The law and the supply of seats, together with the information for parents, are in urgent need of revision. These are the conclusions of a study commissioned by ANEC looking at the lessons to be learned from accidents in the UK, US and Sweden.

ANEC undertook the study to evaluate the limits of protection offered by both forward and rearward-facing restraints for children up to four years of age. The US, Swedish and UK data showed that children in forward-facing seats suffered head, neck, chest and abdominal injuries in circumstances in which a rearward facing restraint would have provided much better protection. ANEC concludes, in common with all other researchers who have examined this topic, that the rearward-facing restraints offer a higher level of safety over forward-facing restraints to children at least up to the age of four years and would have prevented many fatalities had their use been more widespread.

It is clear that a gulf has developed between the conclusions of the technical community, based on accident and test data, and advice provided to consumers through legislation. Through the Mass Group classification, European legislation implies that it is safe for a child to travel forward-facing from 9kg onwards, a weight which can be reached as early as the age of 9 months. ANEC considers as a result that the consumer is not receiving the best technical advice through the Mass Group approach.

In response to consumer crashworthiness programmes focused on the protection of adults travelling in the front seats, contemporary design places considerable emphasis on the crash resistance of cars to frontal impacts. It is now necessary to offer children a similar level of protection through legislation. ANEC therefore urges legislators to revise the law on the use of child restraints in order to provide the most vulnerable consumers with the level of protection they deserve.

Through the study, ANEC not only calls for changes to the legislation but also invites the standardisers to take into account our findings in the development of a new standard. The first step has been taken by presenting the results of the study to the committee¹ working on a new standard for child-restraint systems. The presentation - by the joint ANEC/Consumers International (CI) representative Ronald Vroman - was well received by the technical community. There was clear support for our conclusion that rearward-facing restraints offer children the best protection.

Ahead of our recommended changes to legislation, we urge the manufacturers of child-restraint systems and the car manufacturers to collaborate voluntarily in order to make Scandinavian-style rearward-facing seats for children up to 4 years available to consumers throughout the rest of Europe.

The report of the study is available at: <http://www.anec.eu/attachments/ANEC-R&T-2008-TRAF-003.pdf>

ANEC in brief

ANEC is the European consumer voice in standardisation, representing and defending consumer interests in the processes of standardisation and conformity assessment. ANEC was set up in 1995 as an international non-profit association under Belgian law and represents consumer organisations from the 27 EU Member States and 3 EFTA countries. ANEC is funded by the European Commission and the EFTA Secretariat, while national consumer organisations contribute in kind. Its Secretariat is based in Brussels.

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Footnotes:

¹ Informal Group on child restraint systems (under the UN ECE GRSP - United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Working Party on Passive Safety)