

# Buckle up to save a child

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ABU DHABI // Parents who fail to strap their children into car seats risk turning them into “human missiles” in the event of an accident, doctors said yesterday.

As they demanded a law governing the safety of children in vehicles, medical experts said deaths and serious injuries among young passengers were increasing and many could be easily prevented through the use of seatbelts or child seats.

Legislation was urgently needed to stop the loss of future generations, they said.

Dr Moin Fikree, the clinical director of the emergency and trauma centre at Rashid Hospital, Dubai’s biggest accident treatment centre, said strapping a child into a seat often made the difference between the youngster surviving a crash or being thrown through the windscreen by the impact.

“We have many cars speeding and little children standing up front,” said Dr Fikree. “God forbid, if they get into an accident, they are like human missiles. The amount of injuries you see related to this is unbelievable.”

Injuries from traffic accidents made up a large percentage of the 500 or more paediatric patients admitted to the hospital last year, said Dr Fikree.

“These were not just broken bones, they were severe brain injuries or internal injuries,” he said.

“Of course, if the injury is so bad the child won’t survive.”

The centre, which receives all road accident patients as well as other cases, had seen the numbers of paediatric injury patients increase each year, he added.

A “significant” number of cases were easily preventable”, he added.

Dr Abdulla al Khayat, the chief executive of Al Wasl hospital in Dubai, said it was critical that more legislation and education campaigns were introduced to stop the loss of future generations.

“We try to educate parents when babies are born but more legislation is needed, and it must be enforced properly,” he said.

The call was echoed by Dr Ayesha al Roomi, a member of the Federal National Council.

Dr al Roomi, who is on the FNC's health committee, said she was "very keen" to bring in laws on safety restraints for child passengers.

For years, campaigners have pushed for the law to get tough with people who do not restrain their children in cars, or carry them on their laps in the front seat.

They say the use of child safety seats can reduce the risk of infant deaths by 71 per cent.

There is no federal law governing child seats or sufficient child restraints. The only legal provision is in the black points system, which states that it is illegal to allow children under 10 to sit in the front seat of a vehicle.

It leaves the UAE lagging behind some countries with more stringent laws.

In Britain, it is illegal to carry a child unrestrained in the front seat of any vehicle or to use a rear-facing seat in the front if the seat is protected by an air bag. The United States also has similar strict regulations but it varies from state to state.

In the UAE, however, it's common to see parents driving with their young children on their laps.

Although national statistics are difficult to collate because of the number of different agencies involved, some of the most recent ones show the number of children injured in car accidents remains high.

Road traffic accidents account for 68 per cent of all injury-related deaths in the capital, according to the Health Authority-Abu Dhabi (HAAD). They also account for 15 per cent of all deaths and are the leading cause of death among young males, it said.

A 2008 report by UAE University said that, nationwide, there were 460 deaths relating to traffic among children up to 14 between 2000 and 2006. Forty-one per cent of them were children under four.

According to Think! Road Safety, a British lobby group, a combination of speed and improper restraints can have devastating results. If a car crashes at 48kph, a passenger in the back will hit the seat in front, and anyone in it, with a force of up to 60 times his bodyweight.

"You cannot just work out a dollar cost," said Dr Sheth. "There is also the social side in terms of life expectancy, productivity, the effect on family if a child is left permanently disabled, or the effect on their education. These are future generations. If they are dying as babies, there is no future generation."

According to the HAAD, only 11 per cent of Emiratis and 44 per cent of non-nationals wear seatbelts.

Another UAE University report, cited by HAAD, said that, among vehicle occupants under 14 who died in car accidents in Al Ain between 2005 and 2007, none were found to have been wearing a safety restraint.

“Coming together and talking about the issue reminds the population and decision makers of how important it is. It is always very helpful in terms of directing attention in the right way,” said Dr el Sadig.

Dr Michael Grivna, an associate professor at the faculty of medicine and health sciences at UAE University, said mandatory child car seats was a “very important issue”.

For a child seat law to be passed it must be presented to the FNC for evaluation. Dr al Roomi said she would fully support such a law and was keen to press for one to be drafted.

Dr al Roomi, a paediatrician and a mother, said it was time that something was done to stop parents unintentionally causing serious or even fatal injuries to their children by not strapping them in properly.

“We can ask a question about it in the FNC and press the issue,” she said. “I am aware that injuries like this happen a lot, and it is something the health committee will consider very soon, inshallah.”

Last April, the National Transport Authority said it was working with other government agencies to pass a child safety seat law, but it has not released further details. It could not be contacted yesterday.