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# Little opposition to side crash tests for child seats, but hurdles exist

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By Jayne O'Donnell, USA TODAY

Child safety seats don't have to pass federal side impact crash tests like cars do, something *Consumer Reports*— owned by the advocacy group Consumer's Union — hoped to change with a controversial January report it later retracted.

But National Highway Traffic Safety Administration chief Nicole Nason says the agency might be able to improve child seat safety more quickly by testing the seats' performance in side crash tests using the star-rating system it has for cars. Like automakers, child-seat makers would not be required to pass or do well on these tests, but they would likely try to because of competitive pressures.

## NOT EASY ENOUGH? Child seat attachments come under scrutiny

Nason says such a move could help change the design of seats and provide useful information for families.

"We're always interested in improving our testing," says Nason.

NHTSA stopped work on a possible child-seat side impact rule about three years ago to do more research. While there is no real opposition to the idea of side testing for child seats, there is disagreement on whether it could pass the cost-benefit analysis required for federal rules. There is also no widely accepted child-size test dummy that could be used

Child seats have to pass federal tests for front crashes. NHTSA also rates their ease of use. Nason says she hopes to upgrade this rating system, which currently doesn't give any seat a grade worse than "B."

Don Mays, *Consumer Reports'* product safety director, says "it's unconscionable that infant seats, which are designed to protect the most vulnerable children, aren't routinely tested the same as new cars."

But most infants who die in side crashes are killed because another vehicle's front end plowed inside the car they were in, not because the seat didn't restrain them properly, says Insurance Institute for Highway Safety chief Adrian Lund. He says that the side curtain airbags automakers have vowed to have in all vehicles by the 2010 model year will likely go further in reducing risk than a new child-seat rule would.

Kristy Arbogast, a biomechanical engineer at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, says kids in child seats are at up to four times greater risk in side crashes than front ones. She wants NHTSA to continue work on a possible rule, but says what position seats should be tested in — on the side of the car that's hit, the other side or in the middle seat — would be one of the challenges for regulators.

"No one would disagree that it's a thing to focus on," says Arbogast. "But how to implement it is up for much debate."

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