



**CHILD PASSENGER
SAFETY ASSOCIATION
OF CANADA**



**L'ASSOCIATION POUR
LA SÉCURITÉ DES ENFANTS
PASSAGERS DU CANADA**

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Showing empathy while working in child passenger safety

One of the most challenging aspects of being a CPST can be working with parents and caregivers in situations where we might feel either we aren't being understood or child passenger safety isn't being taken seriously. Parents often feel judged for their choices and it can be difficult to break that wall down to effectively communicate child passenger safety information.

Empathy is the ability to detect what others feel and experience and relate to that emotion yourself. Being aware of someone else's emotions can help you avoid putting your foot in your mouth and it can also assist you in using that emotion and connection to communicate what a parent needs to know to keep their child safe in the car. This is especially important when it comes to a parent who is doing something that we might consider unsafe.

Empathy is also understanding someone's position and how they got there. It's worth noting that understanding doesn't mean agreeing with or encouraging someone's position. Being honest with parents about what you can and can't do, how you can help them, and what your expectations are can help set the right tone for a successful and engaging interaction. A little empathy can go a long way! Using empathy and understanding can quickly defuse a situation where a parent/caregiver may feel judged or defensive.

Often times people don't even realize they have made a decision based on an emotion even if evidence presents another option.

Most times parents come to us because they don't have the knowledge or confidence to install or use their car seats properly. It's important for CPSTs to recognize and acknowledge that even showing up can be really difficult for some parents/caregivers. No one likes to feel judged and often times we meet parents/caregivers that may have issues with financial constraints, lack of knowledge and even cultural differences that result in instances of misuse. It can be easy to make assumptions about someone based on what they drive, how they dress, how they speak or where they live, and that's a path we have to avoid going down. It's important to be aware of your internal (and external) dialogue in these interactions where our assumptions don't line up with what the parent may be telling us. Using empathy isn't always second nature, and

sometimes it takes a lot of work. We don't know this parent's story; we don't know their actual financial situation, and it really isn't our place to get into it or question them. Further to that, even if a parent isn't being totally honest, their misrepresentation is still filling some sort of need for them and we may never know what that need is. Information that connects on an emotional level is the most convincing and effective.

Sometimes when a parent/caregiver has a reaction or says something that we don't understand, it's important to try and understand where they are coming from and why they might be feeling a certain way. As CPSTs, we are often dealing with situations of improper use and in most cases it's because of a lack of knowledge. A great example of this is when someone comes to you and is using an unregulated head support. Internally we may feel shocked as we know the dangers that this presents, but externally it's important that we approach the situation calmly, non-judgmentally and learn to keep a neutral face. It might go over better if you say something like, "I noticed you have this head support. Does it help?" By asking this, you aren't judging them, and this question will also help you identify why they might be using an unregulated product and how you can fix that issue with proper installation and use. Tell the parent that you don't recommend using that product and explain to them how else you may safely fix their perceived issue (adjusting recline, harness tightness, adjusting body pillows, adjusting headrest, etc.). We don't have to approach situations of misuse with scare tactics and harsh or abrupt language because these methods usually have the opposite effect and parents shut down. Using caring and understanding is by far the best way to persuade someone to change something.

It is our role to gently guide parents/caregivers and the community at large to understand the importance of child passenger safety, and if we come across too harshly we have done ourselves, the parents and, most importantly, the kids we are trying to help a disservice and in turn created more barriers.

Poverty or financial limitations can be an especially difficult situation for both families and CPSTs. If a parent says that their financial situation doesn't allow them to buy anything but a used seat, a helpful approach would be explaining to them the risks and supporting them to make the best (legal) decision. This is the reality for some families, no matter how they may present. If we are approachable, understanding and respectful of their limitations, they are more likely to approach us for help. We don't need to have lived poverty to be able to appreciate someone's struggle, but we do need to recognize our own privilege and the way that may affect how we work with people. Our goal is to not make a parent feel like they are a bad parent because they are using a \$100 seat instead of a \$500 seat. Sometimes that \$100 seat truly does mean they had to sacrifice other essentials like heat, groceries or fuel. If someone feels alienated because they can't achieve best practice (but are doing their best to meet legal limits), we have missed our mark. SafER versus safEST is a very real concept and means that we need to have honest and upfront conversations with parents/caregivers.



It also means that we may have to get creative. For example: a family has come to you with an expired seat and they were not aware of this and now they need to be able to get to a store to purchase a new seat. As a CPST, you are not comfortable doing this installation and you would document this clearly; however, the reality is that the seat is uninstalled now and the parents can't go anywhere. Assisting a family to be safer by using their seat as a demonstration seat outside the vehicle or talking them through installing it themselves is a great example of being supportive in a less than ideal situation (again, document - this is where you would tick the box "check not completed" on your form!). Going over CPSAC's Used Seat Checklist with a family that will be purchasing a used seat is a safer way for a family to buy used, and, while we know it isn't recommended, it is the reality for some and we have to try our best to work with what we have. A parent shouldn't be chastised for buying a used seat and education is key.

It's important to note the difference between empowering families by giving them information versus guilt, forcing, shaming or judging them into a situation. Every customer has the right to refuse our services and parent how they choose to parent. It is not our role to take power away from parents, and using an empathic and collaborative approach will help set the foundation for good practice. If you feel unsure about a situation, be honest. It's ok to admit you don't know it all. This can often demonstrate to parents that it can be difficult to get it right and can strengthen rapport. It is never an expectation that a CPST do something illegal, but sometimes our own biases, ethics or expectations can be challenged during an interaction and it can be quite uncomfortable for the CPST and the family.

It's important to be aware of how you're feeling and why you might be feeling that way and how that can colour each interaction you have with a family. Self-reflection is key and will help you establish a plan for when a similar situation may happen again. Being prepared will also increase your confidence. Having a family arrive with a forward-facing child that is 23lbs and 14 months old is the perfect example of where our own bias may come into play. It would be easy to be shocked and immediately tell a parent that this isn't safe, but the reality is that what they are doing is legal and well within their rights as a parent. As CPSTs, we want to follow best practice as much as possible and we do all we can to advocate for child passenger safety, but if we jump on this parent and they feel judged, they will be defensive and a defensive parent is likely to dig their heels in. Avoid a power struggle at all costs and approach these situations with care and patience. It might be better to take a look in the car, take a breath and go through a quick self talk with yourself to help keep your reaction in check. Tell the parent what they are doing right; ask them about how their seat is working for them and if they have any concerns. This may give you an idea as to why they aren't still rear facing and you might be able to problem solve with them. Then ask them in a gentle and non-confrontational way if they would consider turning the seat rear facing and explain why we would recommend it. This is a great example of letting a little out at a time so as to not overwhelm them. Hopefully your knowledge, confidence and good rapport will assist you and the parent to work together to make their situation even safer - having a child leave safER is still a win and, most importantly, you created a positive and safe connection with a family that may leave and come back again. Seeds were planted and it takes time for them to root.



If this is new approach for you or you found some of the above resonates and you want to change your approach for next time, you might find the below list helpful. Showing empathy is something we need to practice on an ongoing basis. It might be helpful to debrief with someone you trust and whom you feel is good at this skill after a difficult parent interaction.

Practicing Empathy Top 10:

1. Meet a parent where they are at and work from there
2. Remove preconceived notions.
3. Know your limits.
4. Be upfront.
5. Admit you aren't perfect.
6. Use understanding.
7. Be aware of your language. (remember they may have zero knowledge on this subject)
8. Don't be overwhelming. (sometimes less is more; let a little out at a time)
9. Be engaging. Ask, don't assume.
10. Debrief successes and challenges with someone you trust.

If you are more of a visual learner there is a short animation on this subject here:

<https://youtu.be/1Evwgu369Jw>.

