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**Finding a Store You Can Trust 4-27-05**  
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I'm about to tell you something that you probably already know. You just haven't heard it said this way by someone in my position.

And even if you have, it's something worth repeating.

A week ago Saturday I found myself in the backseat of a customer's car clinging tightly to the shield bar of her Cosco Grand Explorer booster seat telling her I'd let her keep the seat, but she couldn't have the bar back.

Now, some of you, if you found yourself in her shoes, might have been a bit upset with me. How dare I have the audacity to tell her she couldn't keep part of her car seat?

But her reaction?

"I knew that's why I always come here, you know so much about car seat safety."

You see, we were in the middle of our Annual Spring Car Seat Safety Clinic and I was responsible for checking out her seats.

The one in question was the Cosco Grand Explorer, a small "booster" seat technically known as a "shield booster" in the world of car seats. The problem with this seat is in the "shield" portion of it. Strangely enough, in our bizarre federal car seat testing program, the booster class of car seats are not crash-tested. They are only weighed and measured.

Unfortunately, that means that some seats are on the market (and more importantly in people's cars) that might not pass a crash-test. The Cosco Grand Explorer is one of those seats. When used with the shield, there is the potential – and in fact it has happened many times – for a child to fly out because the belt is not secure across the child. As we all know, having kids flying out of car seats is not a good thing.

If you remove the shield and use the base portion with a lap and shoulder belt from the car, it works just fine. And that is what I instructed the customer to do.

But how would a customer know all that? The Grand Explorer is still for sale. And, as consumers, we trust that all child safety products are designed to work properly. It is natural for a customer to assume her product is safe if it is still for sale.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way.

Here's another example.

The American Academy of Pediatrics website (www.aap.org) says...

"Place baby on his or her back on a firm tight-fitting mattress in a crib that meets current safety standards."

The Danny Foundation (www.dannyfoundation.org) – a leader in crib safety advocacy says...

“Mattress should be firm and tight-fitting.”

The SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) Alliance (www.firstcandle.com) says...

*“Use a safety-approved crib with a snug-fitting **firm** mattress.”* (Their emphasis on firm, not mine)

Basically, every group that knows anything about the safety of babies and crib mattresses reminds you to put your child down to bed on a “firm” mattress.

Yet, still today, there are mattresses sold on the market at leading retailers that would need a gallon of starch, a sheet of plywood and a couple of two-by-fours to come anywhere close to being called firm.

In fact, one low-price leader gives you plenty choices as to which *soft* mattress to put your child at risk on at bedtime, but doesn't offer anything remotely resembling “firm”. And the buyer for that store knows just as much about crib and mattress safety as I do! Yet, that retailer will not allow you to purchase a safe mattress. They don't even carry one!

Why not?

I mean, doesn't the customer come first? Isn't the customer's safety and the safety of her family a priority?

The sad reality is that the answer is no. For some retailers your safety and your family's safety are not high on their priority list. In fact, it takes a far back seat to the almighty dollar.

Oh, if you were to complain, their high-priced attorneys would bring out documents of how these items meet all “federal standards”, and how they are not responsible for the improper use of the product, the claims made by the manufacturer, blah, blah, blah.

But the reality is that their buyers actually had to chose every single item they sell. And their buyers have one and only one criteria on what they buy – will it sell and make money?

It's a dirty little secret in the industry, one that I don't mind sharing, because I believe you deserve to know what goes on behind the scenes.

Wal-Mart claims to be your friend because they save you money, but at what cost? You and your family's safety?

The only way they will pull an unsafe item from the shelf is when the product is no longer selling, usually because the public has suddenly become aware of the product's faults. The same holds true for all the big chains in both retail and other markets.

The tobacco industry knows their product isn't any good for you, but the money is too good to pass up. McDonald's didn't stop super-sizing until the documentary “Super-Size Me” began getting rave reviews, even though the people at McDonalds knew exactly how fattening and health-unfriendly their products were.

So, how do you protect yourself from problems like these? You could start with remembering the old adage, “you get what you pay for.” Buying the cheapest item just to save a buck or two might be more costly in the long run. But even that saying is not completely true.

The Britax Marathon car seat is the most expensive car seat in America and is considered to be the best by most safety experts (including us here at the Toy House).

But the second most expensive seat – which becomes the most expensive at all the discounters who don't sell Britax – is the Alpha Omega by Cosco. And at last week's clinic the Alpha Omega was at the top of our list for the most misused seat. (And it is one of my least favorite seats right up there with the Grand Explorer for how easily it can be *dangerously* misused.)

The other way to protect yourself is to do your homework. Don't just go by "federal standards". They don't tell the whole story. According to "federal standards" the Yugo and the Volvo are equally safe. Yeah, right.

Look at reviews and reports on certain products, especially reviews done by experts in those particular fields. They'll be more honest in telling you what to look for and avoid in certain categories.

Finally, be sure that you shop at a store you can trust. Independent stores like the Toy House have one distinct difference when it comes to selling unsafe merchandise. We can't blame it on a "corporate decision" because we *are* the "corporate decision." We can't hide from our mistakes as easily as a minimum-wage employee at a big chain can. Therefore, we work harder as buyers to make sure our selection of products meets your needs both for value *and* safety.

And isn't that the most important thing?

Happy (and Safe) Shopping!

-Phil Wrzesinski