

# Hearts and Minds and Child Restraints in Airplanes

**S**HOULD THE Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) mandate safety seats for airborne infants? This question has polarized well-meaning and intelligent child advocates. There is much agreement in this area. Nobody disputes that airborne infants are safer in child safety seats than in parents' laps. Nobody disputes that the number of infants who would be spared injury and death if they had their own restraint seats is a small number. Few dispute the fact that there will be some substitution of riskier road travel for air travel: some parents would choose to drive if the airfare for their infant was greater than the cost of car travel. Newman et al<sup>1</sup> show that statistically more infants will die in car crashes than are saved from plane crashes if only 5% to 10% of parents switch from air travel to car travel.

The infants who die in these car crashes do not crash and die statistically; they really crash—they really die. It is beyond our data-gathering ability to go to the automobile crash scene and determine that the parents were only \$100 away from deciding to fly instead of drive. The name and photo of the dead infant in the car crash will not haunt anybody in the world of aviation safety. In contrast, the annals of aviation crashes are tragically marred by the names and faces of infants who obviously would not have been hurt had they been restrained.

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The disagreement is actually less about the mathematics of the issue and sits squarely on the moral standing of statistical lives. The "rule of rescue" is the observation that decisions that can save identifiable human lives are preferred by most laypeople to decisions that save the lives of people who cannot be tracked down and photographed.<sup>2</sup> Deaths are deaths to some child advocates, but for others the deaths of knowable children simply cannot be compared with the deaths of unknown and unknowable children.

The rule of rescue is perhaps most palpable in the statement of Ralph Nader and Wesley Smith, who write,

The argument in support of the FAA's resistance to the NTSB [National Transportation Safety Board] recommended rule mandating child safety seats is unreasonable on its face, and ridiculous in its justification. It protects theoretical children driving in cars at the expense of real flesh-and-blood infants whose safety is unquestionably compromised when flown as a lap-baby.<sup>3(p180)</sup>

That we give preference to saving somebody with a face and a name reflects our humanity. We are not all robot-economists; faces matter. If policies are meant to serve the public interest, the rule of rescue cannot be ignored as irrational. Values need not be rational to affect public policy. Would we be human if we ignored the chance to save an endangered, endearing child?

However, Newman and colleagues raise a point about our humanity that is far less sublime. Even if we put aside the entire issue of automobile crashes and assume that nobody would switch from flying to driving, mandatory infant safety seats would rank as the most expensive life-saving intervention on record. At present, some parents do purchase seats for their infants in the interest of safety. In a free society, parents should remain at liberty to spend \$200 on any legal good, and if they spend it on their child's safety, so much the better for all of us. Parents who pay \$200 for a seat for their infant purchase a reduction in the risk of infant death of 8.3 per 100 million. Whereas these parents bask in the glow of their good intentions, a health economist would hope for the sake of their child that the \$200 could not have been better spent reducing the child's risk of dying from drowning, suffocating, choking, poisoning, or riding in a car—all of which pose greater numerical hazards to the child. For a free society to make such a social decision, we had better all agree (or mostly agree) that we have nothing better to do for our children with our money than to lower their risks during air travel.

Furthermore, it is our money. The cost of moving lap infants to seats will most assuredly not be passed along to the airlines' shareholders. Why not? Right now infants are riding for free. Companies have a duty to shareholders to sell products at prices that maximize profits. Although a temporary policy of free samples might work as a promotion, in the long run the profit-maximizing price of a good can never be zero. Airlines want to sell parents seats for their infants at a higher price than \$0, but they cannot do this without an FAA prohibition against infants riding on parents' laps. In a political environment that is highly sympathetic to the airline industry, draping such a prohibition in the guise of saving lives must appeal to some policymakers.

In the wake of the analysis by Newman and colleagues, child advocates should focus on ways to protect airborne infants while diverting the fewest possible infant travelers into automobiles. The authors discuss a promising compromise that was initially modeled by the FAA. Millions of infants could receive all of the protection of child-restraint systems and none of the costs with a policy of supplying effective infant seats and always seating infants' parents next to vacant seats on subcapacity flights. Safety groups that are genuinely concerned with saving the most lives ought to find this policy attractive, including those within the airline industry. Distractions such as corporate profits and the haunting memories of identifiable infants who have died in airplane crashes threaten the greater good. The article by Newman and colleagues reminds us that the human heart can numb the mind to the highly plausible replacement of identi-

fiable air tragedies by an even greater number of predictable car crashes. The only antidote is to take to heart the words of Albert Schweitzer: "Think occasionally of the suffering of which you spare yourself the sight."<sup>4</sup>

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