

**Calder Bateman**  
**Alberta Occupant Restraint Program**  
**Booster Seats**  
**Creative Assessment**

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Qualitative Research Findings

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# 1. Background and Methodology

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Johnston Research was contracted by Calder Bateman to conduct qualitative research evaluating creative material which encourages the use of booster seats. A total of four (4) focus groups were conducted with Alberta parents who at least one child between the ages of 3 and 8 and who have a driver's license.

This research project gathers reactions to creative material being considered for use. Specifically, research objectives include:

- Exploring awareness of and need for booster seats;
- Investigating patterns of booster seat use;
- Exploring which elements of the creative material resonate most strongly with respondents;
- Investigating which elements of the creative material are less impactful or which distance the viewer from the message; and
- Determining which creative elements are most effective at having respondents reflect on their own use of booster seats.

Two (2) focus groups were conducted in an urban setting (Calgary) and two (2) in a rural setting (Red Deer area, excluding residents of Red Deer proper). Focus groups participants include a cross section of the population, with a mix of:

- Age;
- Gender;
- Occupation;
- Marital status; and
- Number and age of children.

The findings of this report provide a summary of the opinions expressed by focus group participants. Through the exploration of beliefs, opinions, and perceptions, qualitative research is the systematic investigation of subjective experiences. Qualitative research, and specifically focus groups, utilizes small, moderator-led discussions that are exploratory in nature, allowing researchers the flexibility to uncover and examine issues or subjects as they arise in the collection process. Due to the limited number of respondents, results cannot be generalized or quantified, but rather are to be considered in a qualitative frame of reference.

Sandra Johnston moderated all focus groups. Respondents were screened and recruited by Trend Research.

## 2. Summary of Findings

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### 2.1. Awareness and Use of Booster Seats

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The term booster seat is generally understood to mean the “*third stage*” in the progression of car seats / safety seats. There tends to be less awareness of the requirements of a booster seat compared to other child safety seats however.

Parents can speak to the age and weight requirements of going from rear facing to front facing car seat and then to booster seat, but they are less sure when the change from booster seat to seat belt should occur. There is a strong tendency to underestimate the age at which children can begin using seatbelts, “*By the time my daughter was 6 she had outgrown her booster seat and none of her friends used a booster seat anymore.*”

There is a lack of clarity about the specific safety advantages of the booster seat. Some parents believe that the purpose of the booster seat is to simply increase the comfort and sight lines of the child. The booster seat is not seen to provide any additional safety for the children.

For those parents who believe that the booster seat increases the safety of their child(ren), there is not a clear understanding of how or why booster seats provide additional safety over and above the seat belt.

Parents are not clear about the purpose and benefits of the different designs of the booster seat, “*Is the one without the back less safe?*”

The term ‘child safety seat’ is not well understood. It can be perceived as an inclusive term that includes booster seats. When it is seen separately from the term booster seat, it can subtly undermine the safety properties of the booster seat, reinforcing misperceptions that the booster seat’s purpose is to lift the child so that they can have better sight lines.

Recent immigrants indicate that booster seats are not used in their home country. For those parents who are new to Canada, booster seats can be a new concept and the vocabulary may be completely unfamiliar to them.

### 2.2. Education vs. Motivation

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Parents do not have a solid understanding of what the recommended practices are for booster seat use. They are unclear as whether or not there are any safety benefits resulting from booster seat use. They are uncertain how a booster seat increases their child’s safety compared to a seat belt alone, and parents believe that it is safe for children to move out of the booster seat at a younger age than is recommended.

On its own, increasing the parent’s awareness of the recommended practices for booster seat use may not result in higher usage rates. Research demonstrates that parents need also to understand why it is important to follow the recommendations.

Demonstrating the benefits of using booster seats and/or illustrating the consequences of not using booster seats can provide the compelling argument parents need to motivate them to place their child in a booster seat. Showing parents what is at risk when booster seats are not used as recommended creates an emotional reaction, motivating parents to examine and evaluate their own booster seat practices.

Parents need to both understand the booster seat recommendation (they need to know what to do) and they need to know the consequences of misuse or lack of use (they need to understand what is at risk).

### 2.3. Benefits of Using a Booster Seat

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For those parents aware of the specific safety benefits associated with booster seat use, increased safety for the child is a compelling benefit. Parents also indicate the following factors motivate them to use booster seats in the vehicle:

- Increased comfort, *"The belt doesn't rub his neck when he is in the booster seat."*;
- Better sight lines (especially for those driving cars or trucks); and
- Creates a specific spot in the car for each child, *"Every child has their special spot. This becomes Emily's spot, this is for David, etc."*.

### 2.4. Barriers to Using a Booster Seat

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Parents indicate that there are a number of factors which deter the use of the booster seat:

- Uncomfortable for the child, *"My daughter is very tall and thin. When she sits in the seat it cuts off the circulation in her legs."*;
- Concerns about safety, *"When my child is in the booster seat, they sit too high and there is nothing supporting the back of their head. I'm worried that if there was a collision, they would get whiplash."*;
- Child doesn't want to, *"It is a huge fight. My son just doesn't want to get into the booster seat anymore."*;
- Peers don't use, *"When I drop my daughter off at school, she is one of the only kids still in a booster seat."*; and
- Inconvenient. Parents have more than one car or children ride in cars with other parents / grandparents and it is *"a hassle"* to move the booster seats from one vehicle to the next.

Those parents who justify their decision not to use a booster seat with their 7 or 8 year old child indicate they would have made a different decision initially had they received information regarding the benefits of booster seats. Parents indicate *"It isn't*

worth it to buy a booster seat now – my child is almost too old, but if I'd seen this when they were 5 or 6, I'd have kept them in the booster seat." Parents of older children are not rejecting the message, but they do not see the benefits of use being significant enough to change their behaviour.

## 2.5. The 9/80 Rule

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The 9/80 rule is generally new information for parents. They express surprise at the length of time booster seats are recommended, *"Wow – 9 years old. That means they should be in the booster seat until they are in Grade 4. What grade 4 kid still rides in a booster seat?"*

The tagline 9/80 is perceived to be *"catchy"* and memorable. There is some discussion as to whether 9/80 means either 9 years or 80 pounds, or both 9 years and 80 pounds.

For those parents who may be resistant to the message, there is a tendency to argue with age, advising that their children are different than average, *"My son is really big for his age. He is bigger than most kids. He is only 8 now and there is no way he would fit into a booster seat."* Height and weight are perceived as more objective measures and lend a feeling of *"scientific research."* Parents are less likely to disagree with the height and weight requirements.

## 2.6. Trauma vs. Injury

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For parents, the difference in vocabulary between 'injury' and 'trauma' is that trauma communicates a higher level of seriousness, medical intervention and recovery than does the word injury. Parents indicate however that 'Head and neck' is the crucial piece for, *"Trauma might seem more serious, but as soon as you say head and neck, that is what get my attention."*

## 2.7. Use of Statistics

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When exploring the benefits of using specific statistics (4 times more likely) vs. more general information (more likely), parents indicate that the most compelling piece of information is knowing what is at risk - the child's head and neck. The specifics of the statistics are less important, *"It doesn't matter to me how much more likely they are to have an injury – it is knowing that it is their head and neck is at risk."*

While there are those parents who indicate a preference for more concrete information, *"For me, knowing they are 4 times more like to be hurt is huge,"* there are other parents who want to deflate the power of the numbers, *"Four times more likely doesn't really tell me anything. I want real numbers – how many kids have been saved from head and neck injuries?"*

## 2.8. Use of the Website

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There is an indication that parents are interested in investigating the boosterseats.ca website. The website is perceived to be a credible reference source for parents to learn about:

- Safety features of booster seats;
- Statistics or "*hard facts*" supporting the need for a booster seat; and
- The differences and benefits between styles of booster seats.

## 2.9. Reaction to Creative Material - Radio

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### 2.9.a Gramps

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There is strong appreciation for the humour in the Gramps spot. Parents lean in to listen to Gramps speak the second and third time the ad is played. In addition to being seen as funny, respondents indicate that the commercial has "*a sweet quality*", which they find endearing.

The spot reminds people of the ubiquitous argument, "*Back in my day, we didn't worry about....*", a common, and frustrating argument parents themselves are faced with when dealing with their own parents.

Gramps is perceived as being directed in part to the older generation who can push back against the need for booster seats.

Parents indicate that Grandpa becomes the focus of the spot and the intended message is lost, "*I find myself focussing on what Grandpa says and I kind of lose the message about booster seats.*"

The 9/80 rule is clearly heard, but parents indicate that because it does not provide a reason to keep children in booster seats, it does not motivate them to reflect on the safety of their own children, nor does it motivate them to evaluate their own current behaviour.

### 2.9.b Fairy Tale

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The rhythm and tone of Fairy Tale can be appealing and soothing for parents. It is appreciated for its positive portrayal of the use of booster seats, demonstrating the positive outcomes of using a booster seat, '*... they could become anything they wanted...*' rather than the negative outcomes of not using a booster seat.

Concerns are expressed that the ad will not be memorable over time. Parents indicate that the soft voice and music may not leave a lasting impression.

Perceptions exist that the target of the ad is children and the intent of the ad is to encourage younger children to use the booster seat, specifically the younger children who enjoy playing make believe and princesses. The challenge is seen to be that it is older children who resist using the booster seat, but the activities described in the ad 'pretending to be a jet pilot, a queen on her throne, or a princess' appeal to younger children.

For other parents, the ad brings to mind unrelated products or services. Parents indicate that the ad makes them think of trips to Disneyland. Alternately, the term 'magic seat,' brings to mind toilet training products.

Parents appreciate the messaging levels in the ad; first presenting positive motivation to the child for using the booster seat (creative play) and second reinforcing the safety aspect of the booster seat, "*They can be anything they want because they will be alive.*"

### 2.9.c Whine - Siren

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The child's wail which turns into a siren is perceived as being attention grabbing. It is an unsettling transition that clarifies for parents what is at risk when a booster seat is not used, "*It really makes me realize what is a stake – a little bit of crying or a serious accident.*"

The emergency vehicle siren is often perceived to be an ambulance. Some respondents identify the siren as belonging to a police vehicle. It is described as creating a stronger emotional reaction when it is attributed to an ambulance.

Parents identify with the struggle between parent and child and the ensuing temper tantrum. It is described as being a "*familiar*" struggle and it creates a strong sense of guilt for parents as they recognize the temptation to give into the child to avoid the fight.

Respondents indicate they are frustrated with the parent in the ad for "*letting the child win.*" Parents indicate the risk is significant enough that parents should take control and protect the child from the inherent danger of riding in a car without using a booster seat.

The whine / siren ad communicates a sense of seriousness and importance. Parents indicate this ad is motivating, causing them to reflect on their family's use of booster seats.

### 2.9.d Two Women

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The news clip played at the beginning of the Two Women radio spot is accepted as fact. Respondents refer to the news clip as being a real piece of news, creating a sense of legitimacy or believability regarding the need for booster seats.

The scenario of having two women discuss booster seats is described as reflecting how mothers / parents share information. The conversation feels "*real*" for respondents, especially females, "*It sounds like the kind of discussion I have with my friends.*"

Two women effectively emphasises that booster seats should be used for children up to age 9, one of the pieces of information parents are lacking about booster seat use. The statement made by one woman in the spot 'An 8 year old – I thought by that age they could just be in a seat belt' echoes the respondents' thoughts. For many, 9

years is much older than they would have thought necessary for booster seats, *"She asked exactly what I would have asked. It made my question feel normal."*

Parents appreciate that the spot doesn't create guilt or feel condescending, but still creates a sense of importance. The spot is seen to be lacking in emotional connection however and therefore does not create a sense of urgency to act.

## 2.9.e Spinebender

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The unique introduction to the Spinebender ad (carnival sounds which aren't often heard on the radio) breaks through to the respondents and captures their attention.

Generally, the ad is seen to present an effective contrast between the *"ridiculousness"* of letting your child ride the midway rides when they are too small and putting them in the car without a booster seat. There is a strong link between the two actions and *"irresponsible parenting."* The ad clearly illustrates that it is dangerous not to be in a booster seat.

Spinebender is described as being strongly appealing. Parents indicate they like that the ad encourages them to make good choices, *"I like that the ad says 'You'd never put your kids at risk like this.' It gives me the information I needed to make better choices."*

There are respondents who find the comparison between midway rides and booster seat use *"insulting"* or *"odd."* The two actions aren't seen to naturally go together or aren't seen to be of the same magnitude of risk.

There is a sense of immediate danger in the Spinebender ad. Parents speak about the sense of urgency created to ensure their child is in a booster seat. The ad also speaks specifically about head and neck injury / trauma, which is very threatening to parents

## 2.10. Reaction to Creative Material - Posters

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### 2.10.a Rear View Mirror

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The poster with the rear view mirror is confusing for respondents. Parents are unsure how they are supposed to interpret the poster's message. The poster does not effectively dispel any of the misinformation parents have about booster seat use, nor does it provide any new information regarding the need for booster seats.

Respondents indicate that the poster does not deliver a clear or compelling message to motivate booster seat use.

## 2.10.b Booster Seat – Years of use

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In the first two focus groups, respondents are distracted by the word 'Punishment' in the first line of the poster. Parents interpret the message as the booster seat being a form of punishment for the child, casting booster seats in an unflattering light, as something to be endured

In the second two focus groups, the first line of the poster was changed to '5 years old,' which also creates confusion for parents. There is uncertainty as to what is 5 years old – the child using the booster seat, the age of the booster seat or the number of years a child should use a booster seat. The confusion distracts parents from the intended message.

There is appreciation for the line, 'As safe as day one.' It is a reassuring phrase for parents.

Parents indicate the image does not communicate a message of safety or the need for booster seats. Rather, the image of the dirty booster seat distracts respondents. They tend to focus on the need to clean the booster seat. It does not motivate parents to reflect on their own habits around booster seat use.

## 2.10.c Be This High To Ride

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The child's image in the poster communicates that the child is uncomfortable and that the seatbelt does not properly fit the child. The line at the top of the poster reinforces that children need to be a certain size to safely use a seat belt.

Having 3 pieces of information (age, weight, height) is perceived to be "*a lot to take in,*" however respondents appreciate the clarity provided by including both height and weight. While 9/80 is "*simple and easy to remember,*" it can encourage discussion about whether or not a 9 year old "*needs*" to be in a seat belt. The height and weight measurements are described as being more objective measures and are assumed to have their basis in research, "*I believe there is a reason why kids have to be a certain weight and height before using just a seatbelt. The age though seems like such an arbitrary number.*"

## 2.10.d Crash Test Dummy

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The Crash Test Dummy poster quickly communicates a message of danger for neck injury. For those parents who respond positively to the ad, there is appreciation for the level of seriousness communicated by the ad, "*I'll be putting my child in a booster seat right away.*"

The image of the damaged neck of the crash test dummy can be too strong or startling for some parents. The image is described as "*shocking,*" distancing the viewer from the message. Some respondents have a physical reaction to the ad, sucking in their breath, covering their eyes with their hands, and turning their face away from the ad. These parents indicate that they wouldn't read any further into the ad, nor would they look at the poster again.

## 2.10.e Halo

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Seeing a young child having to wear a neck brace or "*halo*" is unsettling for parents. It is an image which captures the audience's attention and creates interest in the story of the youth, "*This drew me in. It made me want to read to find out what had happened to the youth.*"

The idea that a booster seat would prevent similar injuries is compelling for parents.

There are some questions as to whether or not a halo device is used on young children. As well, there are some parents unfamiliar with the image of the halo.

## 2.11. Where to put posters

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Parents indicate that any opportunity to see the poster while they are driving or when they are with their child would be beneficial. The following recommendations are made as appropriate locations for the posters:

- Daycare centres
- Public health units
- Motor vehicle registry agents
- Schools
- Back of busses
- Car dealerships
- Gas stations

Parents also indicate that posters directed at children, in locations like schools, will help to encourage the child to use the booster seat. Anything that will lessen a child's resistance to booster seats would be appreciated by parents.

### 3. Conclusions

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The lack of awareness regarding use of booster seats is significant compared to other social marketing challenges. Parents can be unclear as whether or not there are any safety benefits resulting from booster seat use. Some parents believe the benefits of a booster seat relate solely to comfort and improved sight lines for the child. There is uncertainty about how a booster seat provides additional safety compared to a seat belt or how one style of booster seat compares to another.

Parents believe that it is safe for children to move out of the booster seat at a younger age than is recommended. When defining the recommended use of a booster seat, the 9/80 guideline is simple and memorable, however 9 years of age is unexpected and surprises parents.

Age can be interpreted as being an arbitrary number and some parents will argue with its relevance. Defining booster seat use with height and weight is a more objective measure and is believed to have its grounding in scientific research. Parents are less likely to question these measures.

Providing practical education on booster seat use and increasing awareness of the 9/80 rule will not completely address the short comings in booster seat use. While this addresses what actions a parent should take, it does not provide a compelling reason why parent should use a booster seat. Research demonstrates that there is a need to appeal emotionally to parents to motivate them to use booster seats. Demonstrating the benefits of using / consequences of not using booster seats provides the compelling argument for parents.