

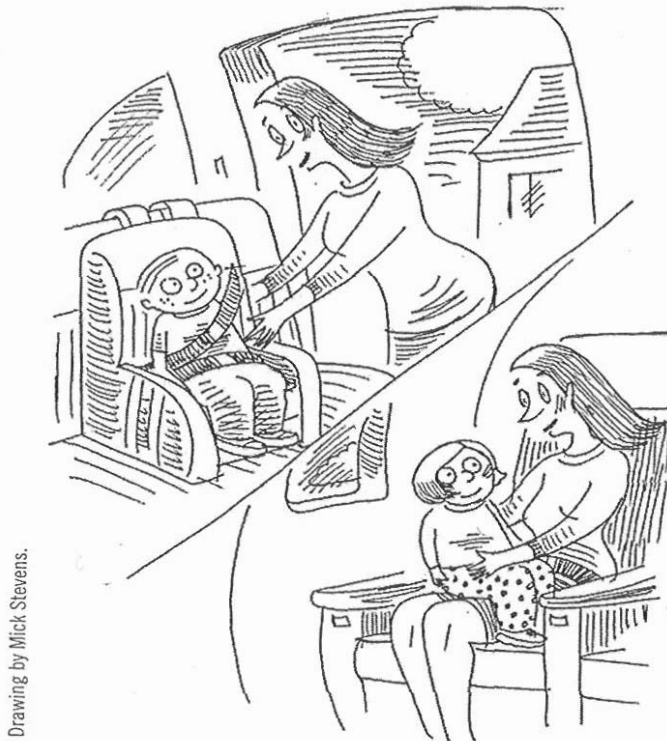
Why are child safety seats required in cars but not in airplanes? (Greg Balet)

In your car, the government requires that your child be fastened securely into a safety seat of approved design, even for a short drive to the grocery store. Yet you can keep a child under two on your lap untethered when you fly from New York to Los Angeles. What explains this difference?

Some have attributed it to the fact that if the plane crashes, you are going to die anyway, strapped in or not. That is true, but there are many other things happen short of a crash—severe air turbulence, for example—for which being belted in helps a lot.

A more plausible explanation begins with the observation that, once you have a child safety seat, it is costless to strap your child into it in the backseat of your car because there is almost always enough room for it. Since the marginal cost is zero and the marginal benefit is improved safety for your child, strapping your child in while traveling in your car makes perfect sense. If you are on a full flight from New York to Los Angeles, however, you must buy an extra ticket in order to strap your child into a safety seat, which might cost you \$1,000 (even with a Saturday stayover).

124 • THE ECONOMIC NATURALIST



Drawing by Mick Stevens.

The opportunity cost of using a safety seat is much lower in cars than on a full flight.

People may not feel comfortable saying that it is too expensive to provide the extra safety for their children when traveling by air, but that is essentially what it boils down to. So they hold tight to their children and hope for the best, rather than pay \$1,000 for an extra seat.