

Mothers of Innovation: The Women Behind Toyota's Child Car Seat App

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Mothers are known for their resourcefulness, ingenuity and can-do attitude. So, when two moms at Toyota recognized there had to be a better way to get guidance on how to install car seats properly, they rose to the challenge and created [Toyota For Families](#) — a digital toolkit that features detailed car seat installation and instructions for the Toyota Sienna. Their biggest hurdle? The platform was launched during the pandemic while juggling this project with their full time now-virtual work and managing a household.

Sparked by Jennifer Pelky, a principal engineer of vehicle performance development for interior safety, the idea for creating a tool to lessen the frustration associated with car seat installation and to help make travel safer for moms' most precious cargo — their children — came together over lunch with Lindsay Babian, a fellow Toyota principal engineer and 2021 Toyota Sienna vehicle seat development lead.

Who said good ideas only emerge from boardrooms? In this case, it was over lunch in Toyota's Research & Development cafeteria in Michigan.

Filling a void and embracing teamwork

"I thought, if I'm an engineer in safety, and I'm having trouble figuring this out, then lots of people must be

having trouble,” says Pelky whose sons are now 10 and 7. “I wanted to help my own family, but also our customers by making our vehicles more friendly for families.”

During their cafeteria conversations in 2019, the pair swapped stories about the complicated car seat installation process and their willingness to improve it while educating parents. Babian, a mom to a 5½-year-old commented, “I design and develop the parts that parents use to install their car seats, and even I wasn’t getting my sons’ installed correctly.”

In fact, it was Pelky — a certified child passenger safety technician — who’d informed Babian her car seat wasn’t installed properly when she went to borrow it for an evaluation.

“It was surprising to me that I also fell into this category of not doing it right,” says Babian.

Pelky and Babian shared their idea with Janelle Pharris, a senior planner on the Vehicle Marketing and Communications team at Toyota Motor North America, who provided the marketing and design expertise needed for the project to become a reality. As a mom of two children, ages 13 and 5, Pharris loved the concept, and the team got to work.

“This was a project that I was totally excited to work on,” says Pharris. “Every time the meeting would come up when it was time to get in front of the camera, and Jen said, ‘Hey. Can you do it?’ ‘Absolutely.’ If we can just help anyone from a brand initiative, as well as from a personal initiative, then I think our job is well done.”

What started as a passion project for Toyota’s internal Innovation Fair in 2019 ultimately became Toyota for Families, which officially launched in March 2021. The team wanted to provide a whole new level of detail — from identifying how seats are affixed with different latch configurations to demonstrating the instructions with videos.



Staying the course and navigating roadblocks

Executing the platform took true dedication and tenacity from the team of moms, which was fueled by their never-ending desire to help protect children. And not just safeguard their own families, but all moms and caretakers who drive children around.

“I think for all of us, the personal side had to do with us looking into our children’s eyes and realizing that we never wanted any mother to feel any loss because of an improperly installed car seat,” says Pharris. “And when you see the data around how many car seats are installed improperly, it spoke to us all to do our part in trying to make sure that we were able to provide at least a resource for mothers, fathers, for grandmothers, for uncles, aunts, to be able to safely transport their children, at least within a Toyota vehicle.”

However, equipping parents with the tools to make car seat installation easier was not met without challenges. A global pandemic could have derailed the project.

“The idea originated prior to COVID, but in terms of implementation, they [Toyota team members] started working on this, and then the pandemic hit,” says Babian.

Working from home while assisting with remote learning and all of the other challenges and setbacks that moms faced during the past year propelled the mission and made it even more timely to put out into the world.

“Parenting is already hard, right? But installing your car seat doesn’t have to be,” says Pelky. “This is definitely a passion project built off of our shared experiences and struggles. It was a way for us to do something to just make lives a little bit easier for our customers. And most importantly, to help them stay safe.”





A culture of innovation

Toyota believes in driving innovation and supporting new ideas through passion and problem-solving. By putting themselves in the customers' shoes, Pelky and Babian were able to design a much-needed solution to a real problem—and turn to their talented colleagues to help get the idea off the ground.



The app and website are the direct results of curiosity, drive and unparalleled teamwork.

“Doing this all during the pandemic is near impossible” says Babian. “If there was any resistance, challenge or barrier that got in our way, we found workarounds, we found champions, we found teammates, we found support, and we all worked hard. We pushed through the challenges and made it a reality.”



Resources





Interactive tools to help families ride safely
<https://www.toyota.com/owners/resources/toyota-for-families>



Car seat and other safe travel tips for families
<https://www.buckleupforlife.org/>



Boost your car seat skills with free e-learning from NHTSA and the NSC
<https://www.cpsboard.org/resource-center/trainings/>



Find a local car seat inspection station
<https://www.nhtsa.gov/equipment/car-seats-and-booster-seats#installation-help-inspection>

