State Police to enforce child vehicle restraint law

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State Police Commander Wiley McCormick with some approved child restraint seats

Parents had better keep their young children tied down in the family car if they want to avoid trouble with a new law that goes into effect Tuesday, State Police Commander Wiley McCormick said Thursday.

"We plan a very vigorous, aggressive enforcement program" for the child passenger restraint law, McCormick told a news conference.

The law was written in an attempt to save lives by requiring children under 5 years old to be strapped down while riding in most types of vehicles.

During the first six months of this year, 17 Louisiana children under 5 were killed and 1,346 were injured in traffic accidents, many because they were not restrained, McCormick said.

"We are going to be issuing a lot of tickets during the first 90 days," he said. "We're going to be looking for children who seem to be loose in the car . . .

The No. 1 priority will be parents who hold their children while driving because a parent thrown forward in an accident can crush a small child against the dashboard or steering wheel, McCormick said.

He said troopers have been instructed to "show no mercy to mothers carrying babies in their arms driving a vehicle."

The law requires children under 3 years old to be restrained in a federally approved restraint device. McCormick said 3- and 4-year-olds can either be held in a restraint device or buckled with a regular seat belt if they are riding in the back seat.

The law applies to children riding in autos and private vans and in pickup trucks with a manufacturer's suggested load capacity of 2,000 pounds or less. The law does not apply to ambulances and other emergency vehicles, buses, taxis, commercial trucks and private trucks with a capacity of more than 2,000 pounds, and recreational vehicles with a capacity of more than 10 people.

Offenders face a fine of $25 to $50, but the fine may be waived by a judge if the parent displays proof that he or she has purchased a child restraint device during a brief period after issuance of the citation.

In a lengthy memo, McCormick cautioned state troopers:

"This is a new law with some irregularities (and) officers are encouraged to use discretion in its enforcement."

For instance, "If a child looks 4 to us and they say the child is 6, we're going to take their word for it" and not write a ticket if the child is not restrained, McCormick said.

"If the child looks six months and they say he's 6, we won't fall for it," he said.

McCormick said troopers will be on the lookout for loose children in the same manner that they look for expired license plates and inspection stickers.

He said troopers will follow the same procedures used in writing tickets for other traffic offenses. That means that in many jurisdictions an offender will have to surrender his license or post bond.