

SAFETY

Sledding dangers often overlooked

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MELROSE, Mass. -- Halfway down the hill, picking up speed, Denis Taylor ran into a snow ramp, lost control of his toboggan, spun around and went overboard.

The 9-year-old was fine. Another boy, though, was headed right for him.

His mother, Rene Taylor, began to shout.

"Denis," she said, "look out!"

The boys narrowly missed each other. Neither seemed to think anything about what might have happened if they had collided.

But safety and health experts do think about things that can go wrong.

"Sledding -- I hate to say it -- is a high-risk behavior," said Dr. Mark Moseley, medical director of the Emergency Department at the Ohio State University Medical Center.

"You obtain a certain speed, you're not protected. We can see some substantial injuries."

In a regulated world where children are consigned to ride in car seats for years, forced to wear helmets while bicycling and lorded over by anxious parents, the sledding hill remains a frontier of unbridled freedom.

Want to climb aboard a snow tube with a friend and spin headlong down a hill? Fine. Want to hurtle headfirst toward a parking lot on a sheet of plastic? Have at it.

Sledding is not only a time-honored tradition but also the epitome of what many of today's parents desperately want: a child who's playing outside with friends.

But recent sledding accidents in Massachusetts and two deaths in New York have cast a stark light on the dangers associated with sledding and prompted some officials to re-examine sledding policies.

Some communities and golf courses, including the Ohio State courses in Upper Arlington, have banned sledding in recent years.

The Columbus Recreation and Parks Department discourages sledding in its parks.

Other communities, after consulting with lawyers, have posted signs warning people that they are sledding at their own risk. And some people are pushing for a law that would require children 12 and younger to wear a helmet while sledding.

"Sledding, we take it for granted sometimes. But it's a dangerous activity in that there can be very serious injuries if something goes wrong," said Massachusetts state Sen. Steven Panagiotakos, who sponsored a mandatory helmet bill. "There are no brakes on a sled."

Panagiotakos argues that a state that requires children to wear helmets while bicycling -- as Massachusetts does -- should mandate equipment for sledding.

A helmet is a good idea, agreed Dr. John Drstvenssek, emergency-room chairman for Riverside Methodist Hospital; and Nichole Hodges, coordinator for the home-safety program at Nationwide Children's Hospital.

"It's rare, but we have had some really serious injuries" -- including head, brain and spine trauma and even ruptured organs -- as a result of sled accidents, Drstvenssek said.

Riverside sees fewer than 10 serious sledding injuries a year, he said, but treats plenty of minor ones.

Because of sledding accidents, Hodges said, nine youngsters have been admitted to Children's since November.

In addition to wearing a helmet, she advises using a sled that allows steering (as opposed to an inner tube, a disk or a basic plastic sled) to avoid unexpected trouble.

The consequences aren't limited to the young.

Adults are frequent victims, too, said Loren Leidheiser, an emergency-room physician at Mount Carmel St. Ann's hospital in Westerville.

"We've been very much rocking and rolling since we got the big snow," Leidheiser said. "We see an awful lot of broken bones, ankle sprains, dislocated shoulders. It's almost predictable."

About 22,870 people are injured each year while sledding, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But what troubles doctors more than the number of sled-related injuries is the sort of injuries they see. A 2005 study, published in the journal *Pediatric Emergency Care*, found that head and neck injuries accounted for more than 50 percent of sled-related emergency room visits.

"People think it's a fairly innocuous winter activity, thinking they can smash into a tree and be fine,"

Drstvensek said. "They don't equate it with real injuries, but they should. These injuries are preventable."

Dispatch Reporter Kevin Joy contributed to this story.

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