

SLEDDING SAFETY TIPS

Any parents can imagine the numerous pitfalls. Every year thousands of kids are injured during sledding accidents.

More often than not, the scrapes and pains are minor, but sometimes they are serious, even fatal.

What can you do to ensure your sledding outings end with little more than wet seats and cold noses, instead of a trip to the emergency room?

What the Doctors Say

The Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons has published guidelines, divided into two groups, the first of which they label "essential":

- Sled only in designated areas free of fixed objects such as trees, posts and fences.
- Make sure that all children in sledding areas are supervised by parents or adults.
- Kids must sit in a forward-facing position, steering with their feet or a rope tied to the steering handles of the sled. No one should sled head-first down a slope.
- Do not sled on slopes that end in a street, drop-off, parking lot, river or pond.

The Orthopedists add a second set of rules, which they label "preferred":

- Children under 12 years old should sled

wearing a helmet.

- Wear layers of clothing for protection from injuries.
- Do not sit/slide on plastic sheets or other materials that can be pierced by objects on the ground.
- Use a sled with runners and a steering mechanism, which is safer than toboggans or snow disks.
- Sled in well-lighted areas when choosing evening activities.

Helmets?

Though the Academy recommends that kids 12 and under should wear helmets, it seems that if an activity requires a helmet, kids of any age should wear one.

After all, the older kids are, the faster and more daring their sledding runs become.

Helmet use may depend on one's situation.

Most kids these days are used to wearing helmets, whether they're biking, roller blading or ice skating.

Throwing one on for sledding shouldn't be much of a stretch.

It makes perfect sense to extend the rule to sledding.

Helmets provide protection and insulation on particularly cold days.

Supervise Kids

This is always a good thing, and one of the best ways to ensure sledding safety.

Parents should accompany preschool-aged kids in the sled.

Older kids can sled alone, parents should be present to make sure other kids don't become rough or careless.

Kids often get so involved in their own activity that they sometimes forget there are other kids on the hill.

Check Conditions

They change each day. What's safe one day may not be the next.

Avoid obstacles, bumps, patches of ice.

Don't be shy about testing a hill to determine if it's safe.

Inspect Sleds

Make sure your child's sled is sturdy and can be steered.

Avoid homemade sleds made from garbage can lids or plastic bags, which are hard to steer and can be pierced by rocks and branches hiding under the snow.

Make sure the sled doesn't have any broken parts or jagged edges that can cause injuries.

Check Your Child

Make sure he or she is dressed warmly and stays dry.

It's safest for them to sled sitting up. Kids should never go down head first or standing up.

Tuck Them In

Make sure arms, legs, drawstring and loose bits of clothing are tucked in.

Scarves and clothes with drawstrings aren't safe as these can get tangled or stuck on obstacles on the way down.

Sledding safely requires a bit of preparation and caution on your end, but don't let that get in the way of having fun.

Checklist:

Check out the view:

- Choose hills with a gentle slope and long run-off area.
- Choose snowy hills and avoid icy surfaces.
- Be sure hill is free of holes and obstacles such as trees, signs, fences and rocks.
- Stay away from roads, rivers, railways and parking lots.

- Only sled in the daylight or on well-lit hills.

Check out your style:

- Go down the hill sitting or kneeling up on the sled.
- Never go down the hills head first or standing up.
- Be sure the way is clear right down to the bottom.
- Take your turn; do not go down right after another sledder.
- On the way down, tuck in arms, legs and clothing such as scarves, drawstrings and long hats
- If you fall off the sled or stop unexpectedly, quickly move out of the way of other sledders.

Check out your gear:

- Dress properly with hats, mittens, and warm, waterproof clothing including footwear (avoid clothes with drawstrings).
- Be sure the temperature is not too cold (take into consideration the wind chill factor when sledding).
- Choose sturdy sleds with secure hand holds; ensure there are no jagged edges, splinters or protruding parts.
- Avoid sliding carpets, inner tubs, cardboard sliders, snow discs and other sledding equipment that is difficult to control.

Check out the supervision:

- Children under 12 should be supervised by a responsible adult.
- Children under 5 should have a responsible adult on the sled with them.
- Monitor children for wet clothes, chilling, frostbite or fatigue.
- Mediate conflicts that may occur between sledders.

Now get out there in the snow and do it!