

Helmets are a no-brainer

Groups, parents emphasize the risks of going without



Wearing a helmet, Mackenzie E. Clendenin, 12, sits on her bike outside her house in Clinton. (T&G Staff / TOM RETTIG)



Students listen during a presentation by the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts at Major Edwards Elementary School in West Boylston. (ED COLLIER)

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Bicycle Alley employees Neil Medin, left, and Jeff Robert, both cyclists, demonstrate the proper fit of a bike helmet. (T&G Staff / CHRISTINE PETERSON)

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By Jennifer Michalski SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

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Mackenzie E. Clendenin went speeding down a hill on her scooter and came to a crashing halt. Luckily, the 12-year-old Clinton girl's only injury was a scraped arm. Mackenzie was wearing a helmet, something she said her parents have encouraged her to do since she began riding a bike.

"It just stuck," she said.

With summer under way, kids are taking to scooters, bikes and in-line skates. But these "vehicles of independence" also present the ongoing challenge of getting children to use helmets, according to Sabrina Fanger, a school and youth safety

program manager at the Westboro-based Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts.

Ms. Fanger believes educational programs, legal enforcement and parental insistence are among the "multiple factors in the environment working comprehensively" that will increase helmet use among children.

Mackenzie's mother, Dorothy Anaral, who calls herself "a paranoid parent," said she and her husband have been very strict about teaching Mackenzie to wear a helmet. "A well-formed habit stays with you," she said.

One in four children, ages 4 to 17, does not wear a helmet when riding a bike, according to a 2009 C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll. Every day, about 100 children are treated in emergency rooms for bicycle-related injuries, the poll found.

Mackenzie said she's heard about injuries other bike riders have sustained from not wearing a helmet. A few of her peers have even suffered concussions falling from a bike.

"Wearing a helmet isn't such a burden to do," she said. "And it keeps them safer."

Helmets reduce the risk of head injuries by 85 percent, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and prevent fatalities. Based on data from the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 91 percent of bicyclists killed in 2008 were reportedly not wearing helmets.

A seventh-grader at St. Mary School in Shrewsbury, Mackenzie said her friends usually wear helmets but "if they don't, I tell them to," she said.

Educating children about the importance of wearing helmets is the focus of a school-based program, Think A-Head, offered by the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts. Some modules in the program cover sports concussions and the effects of alcohol and drug abuse. The bicycle safety module targets students in fourth and fifth grades, covering the importance of wearing a helmet and the proper way to wear a helmet.

Ms. Fanger said a benefit of presenting the program in schools is the students' love of participation. The target age group for the bicycle safety module is "a time when kids are engaging in activities that are a bit rougher," said Bill Kimball, a presenter for the association.

It's also when parents are allowing kids to ride their bikes farther and for a greater amount of time, said Melissa Cassata, PTA member at Major Edwards Elementary School in West Boylston. Ms. Cassata arranged for a Think A-Head presentation at Major Edwards.

To help students visualize the dangers of not wearing a helmet, Mr. Kimball dropped two eggs he named Mr. and Mrs. Egg. There was a collective gasp when the children saw the yolky splatter result from Mr. Egg's decision to forgo a helmet.

Massachusetts has mandated helmet use for bicyclists 16 and younger since 2004; 21 states and the District of Columbia have bicycle helmet laws. According to the Association for Public Policy and Management, over the course of the 1990s, state helmet laws decreased fatalities by 11 percent.

The Massachusetts law also requires bicycle retailers to display a sign informing customers of the helmet law.

David Kahn, owner of Bicycle Alley in Worcester, said he advises customers to wear helmets and even requires test riders to wear helmets in the parking lot.

Frank Kenneway Jr. of Worcester carries a helmet in his car and plans to give it to the next person he sees riding a bike without a helmet. Mr. Kenneway, who works at Barney's Bicycle in Worcester, said helmets are a cheap investment in personal safety. "It's a brain bucket; it's not a helmet," he said.

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