

[IMAGE]

Safety Gear No Substitute for Supervision

Parents today seem to do a great job preparing their kids for risky activities, thanks to recent advances in safety equipment designed to prevent injuries. Most kids use bicycle helmets, wrist guards, knee pads, safety mats, or life jackets, depending on what they're doing. Yet unintentional injuries remain the principal cause of disability and death in children over age one.

Safety gear often does work; for example, helmet usage has clearly been proven to reduce a child's chances for head injury. But there is a potential drawback to safety equipment, according to a recent study in *Injury Prevention*.

A telephone survey of 54 mothers of 7- to 9-year-old children in Ontario, Canada, revealed that the parents allowed their children to take significantly greater risks when safety gear was used. Parents also allowed their children to participate in riskier endeavors if they thought their kids were more experienced at the activity, regardless of safety gear use. (Evidence, however, suggests that boys with more experience at something are just as likely to be injured as those with less experience.) This was true in all seven activities studied: bicycling, swimming, skating, sledding, climbing, running, and jumping on a trampoline.

Safety gear may moderate injury risk, but it certainly doesn't eliminate it. By allowing your children to take greater risks when safety gear is used, you make them no safer than if they took normal risks without gear. Don't just tell your children to wear their helmets. Monitor their activities to prevent them from taking additional risks under the false assumption that they can't be hurt while wearing protective gear.

Reference:

Morrongiello BA, Major K. Influence of safety gear on parental perceptions of injury risk and tolerance for children's risk taking. *Injury Prevention* 2002;8, pp. 27-31.

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