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WHAT'S THE BEST SLED?

Snow-covered hills produce fun, excitement—and 21,000 trips to the E.R. every year. So we pick the safest—and most thrilling—sleds for your kids, and you...

By Rachel Grice

Remember grabbing your red plastic saucer from storage and hurtling down the hill as your parents wrung their hands in terror? Well now maybe you're the dad yelling "Slow down!" as your little bundles of scarves and jackets follow in your daredevil sled tracks. Well, you—and your parents—are right to worry: a new study from the Center for Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, reports that there an average of 20,820 sled-related injuries brought to the ER every year.

"It's quite a staggering statistic when you realize that sledding is not a year-round activity," says study author Lara McKenzie, Ph.D. She also found that children aged 10 to 14 were the most likely to sustain injuries while sledding, and that boys represented nearly 60 percent of cases. They generally ended up with fractures or lacerations while girls were more likely to sustain sprains and strains. Talk about your nasty wintry mix.

So to keep all your sledding action safe and fun this season, choose the right equipment and take a few key precautions.

1) Avoid saucers and snow tubes.

Sure, the big inflatable things are fun because you can load them up with lots of kids and bounce over bumps. But that's also a huge problem. The bounciness of snow tubes can send kids flying, and both tubes and saucers are completely uncontrollable. "They also have a tendency to rotate while sliding down a hill, making it harder to see where you're going and increasing your chances of hitting trees or fences," McKenzie says.

2) Buy a sled you can control.

The Flexible Flyer—a 140-year-old design—had it mostly right. "Sleds that have runners, steering and brakes are the safest since you have more control over where you are going and how fast," says Fran Mullin, executive director of the non-profit WinterKids. The original Flyer doesn't have brakes, so try one of these if you want that added level of security:



—Flexible Flyer PT Blaster (\$69.99; pariconsleds.com): The springactivated brake keeps you from going too fast down a steep hill; the steering wheel helps you to dodge trees and rocks.



—Paricon 936 Interceptor (\$35.65; pariconsleds.com): There are molded plastic side

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both allows you to brake.

—Mountain Boy Sledworks Slalom Sled (\$129.99; mountainboysleds.com): The entire front section of this sled pivots for control. Plus, the runners along the bottom give you added stability.



—Stiga King Size Snow Racer (\$175; **bossbi.com**): This one's big enough to give the grown-ups a thrill. The steering column makes driving this like driving a car, and the skis on the

bottom keep it on track. This sled also has a brake and shock absorbers.

3) Cover their noodles.

Helmets have finally made their way onto the ski slopes. Now we need them on the smaller hills, too. The most frequently injured body part was the head, so relative coolness is a small price to pay for that protection. "Requiring kids to wear helmets while sledding could help reduce the amount of traumatic brain injuries like it did for skiers and snowboarders," McKenzie says. Just make sure the helmet is either a snowboard helmet or a bike helmet with a warm hat on underneath—those vents that keep you so cool on summer bike rides will chill you to the bone in winter.

4) Check the run.

Collisions with rocks, trees, and telephone poles were the most common cause of accidents, accounting for about half of sledding injuries. "Make sure the sledding area is free from obstacles," says McKenzie. Also make sure there's a long run-out area at the bottom of the hill, and that it doesn't lead into the street.

5) Sit up.

Don't take sledding lying down. "When you are sitting upright, facing downhill, you can see where you are going. That's a big advantage," says Fran Mullin, executive director of the non-profit WinterKids. You may not be quite as aerodynamic, but a slightly slower top speed is definitely better than a trip to the ER.

6) If necessary, abandon ship.

The worst feeling in the world is to be screaming down the hill and realize that you're basically doomed. (This can happen even with steerable sleds—if you hit, say, a patch of ice.) "If you get out of control and can't stop, bail out," Mullin says. Teach your kids to check for trees and other sledders, then roll off the side and onto the ground. "It might be scary to do this, but it's much better than hitting a tree," she says.

7) Use common sense.

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Your brother-in-law's ATV may be a lot of fun in the snow, but the vehicles aren't meant to tow kids—no matter how much they beg for it. "Never, ever let your child ride their sled behind a car, ATV or other vehicle," McKenzie says. Part of the reason is that even though the vehicle may turn on a dime, the sled it's dragging won't. As a result, kids are much more likely to find themselves sling-shotting into car's path or straight into a tree stump, and then end up in the hospital.

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