



## Helmets for kids – what’s the right choice?

Keeping kids in the right safety equipment can be a challenge. Kids grow so fast, and the gear is not cheap. Cutting corners by using the wrong helmet, or one that doesn’t fit well, risks injury or worse. Responsible parents choose safety gear that provides the best protection and meets the requirements of New Mexico’s state Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) statute and regulations.

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish OHV program often gets calls from parents asking if bicycle helmets are okay for their kids. Our answer is, “only for bicycling.” Bicycle helmets and motorsports helmets have to meet different standards for impact protection, penetration resistance and retention on the wearer’s head. Parents would be understandably confused trying to sort through the different tests, so helmet manufacturers and importers are required to put stickers on their helmets indicating compliance with the different motorsports or bicycle helmet standards.

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish Regulation 18.15.3.8 New Mexico Administrative Code (NMAC) requires that anyone under the age of 18 years who rides in or on an OHV, whether as operator or passenger, has to wear a safety helmet meeting either the U.S. Department of Transportation Standard 218 or the European Union standard 22.05. A helmet bearing either a ‘DOT’ sticker or an ‘ECE22.05’ sticker, usually on the lower back edge of the shell, can be assumed to meet the standard.



Motorsports helmets have three different features important to OHV users:

- First is the outside shell, made of fiberglass or plastic, that resists penetration and distributes impacts over the helmet’s surface. When the shell takes an impact, it will usually show damage such as chips, flakes or cracks that signal the helmet has reached the end of its service life.
- Second is the inner liner, made from expanded polystyrene foam (EPS). The EPS liner absorbs and slows down impacts, but it compresses in the process like a foam coffee cup. Once the liner has absorbed a big hit, it has done its job and the helmet should be replaced.
- Third is the retention system, usually a chin strap fastened with steel double D-rings or a metal buckle and the padded comfort liner. It keeps the helmet on, customizes the fit and helps absorb sweat and dirt. Some helmets have a removable liner that can be taken out for cleaning.

Helmets sold for use while riding bicycles have to meet different standards, enforced by the federal Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). There should be stickers with several warnings inside each bicycle helmet about proper fit; that helmets damaged by impacts should not be reused; that helmets can be damaged by paint, sticker adhesives or solvents; and that no helmet can prevent all injuries or fatalities. Bicycle helmets also have to bear a sticker showing they comply with CPSC standards for use by children age one and up, or age five and up.



Bicycle helmets like the yellow and black one shown above have lots of vents that make them lighter and cooler, but lack the penetration protection of a motorsports helmet. Unlike motorsports helmets that feature a heavy outer shell that meet Department of Transportation (DOT) safety standards, bicycle helmets contain only a thin plastic or fiberglass protective layer. They do have the same type of EPS foam inner liner, and for the same reasons a bicycle helmet that takes a big impact should be replaced. The chin strap of a bicycle helmet is usually not as sturdy and uses a plastic buckle for closure instead of steel. Many skateboard helmets don't even meet bicycle standards, and should never be used for motorsports.

DOT approved helmets for very young kids are hard to find. Even the extra-extra-small size may be too big for a toddler passenger in a side-by-side. A poorly fitting helmet can be dangerous to the wearer regardless of age. It can come off when it's most needed, and even become a choking hazard. This should give pause to parents wanting to take very young kids for rides.

In a family car or truck, young kids are required to ride in child safety seats. The seats provide protection beyond what helmets are intended to do. But OHV manufacturers do not recommend that young children ride in OHVs, child safety seat or not. And OHVs do not include features such as latch anchor points that allow safety seats to be securely installed.

Parents should consider if a child is too young to ride in or on an OHV given the experience of the driver, possible dangers of riding over rough or unfamiliar terrain and the many hazards that can cause rollovers or the ejection of a person. The safest recommendation for these types of situations is that once a child is old enough to wear a snug-fitting DOT- or ECE-approved helmet that meets New Mexico state OHV statute and regulations, only then are they old enough to consider putting them in or on an OHV.