



Doc 6.9 GUIDANCE Cycle helmet

Compulsory cycle helmets are likely to damage children's health more than they increase safety. Children's use of bicycles is completely different to that of adults. Adults go from home to work or other activity and then return. They put their helmet on at the beginning of the journey and take it off at the end.

When children play out, they make lots of very short journeys, often less than 50 metres. They may have a bicycle but will get on and off it lots of times during an hour or two of play.

If helmets were to be made compulsory then parents would either have to constantly nag their children to keep them on, or in reality find it easier to stop their children playing on bikes. So, children's healthy outdoor activity and freedom to play will be even more restricted than at present.

Children often leave items of clothing behind. A helmet being taken on and off would be particularly vulnerable to getting lost or just left behind, and so the parent would have the regular expense of buying new ones (or stopping their child cycling to avoid that expense).

There is an additional hazard that would be created. If children cycle to a play area (swings, climbing frames, etc) and keep their helmets on then they would be more vulnerable to head entrapment leading to strangulation. Equipment is designed to avoid trapping normal size heads. If they slipped through a gap in the equipment the danger would be that the helmet would prevent them going through completely. Playground equipment is designed so that if there is a gap children will fall through completely. A broken bone is a lot less serious than a broken neck or strangulation. For the same reason there would also be an increased risk from climbing trees.

Cycling is part of a healthy lifestyle and if children learn to ride a bike at an early age there is at least some chance that they will use it for journeys in preference to a car as they grow up. If someone does not learn to ride a bike when they are a child, they find it much more difficult to learn as an adult and are therefore much less likely to use it as part of a healthy lifestyle.

Why stop at cycling?

Children play with scooters, skates, skateboards etc. Is their play to be further restricted on these? The risks are similar. We need to address the domination of the car rather than restrict children (see publications on the OPAL website, <https://outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk>).

Where the risks to a healthy lifestyle are greater than the risks from "safety" measures then health should take priority – particularly when the increased safety is marginal at best.

This document was created with advice from Rob Wheway, Director at the Children's Play Advisory Service (www.childrensplayadvisoryservice.org.uk). Rob has carried out observational research of children's play at over 70 areas of housing. He carries out safety inspections of hundreds of playgrounds each year.