

New helmet law should have impact in Watsonville

By ETHAN BARON
STAFF WRITER

CHILDREN ARE more likely to receive serious head injuries in bicycle crashes than adults, both because of their physical proportions and the way they ride, said a local nurse and member of the county's safety coalition.

"Kids change direction in a second," said Lisa Angell, Watsonville Community Hospital's pediatric liaison nurse and a member of the Santa Cruz County Community Traffic Safety Coalition. "All of a sudden, they're there."

Children have heads disproportionate in size and weight to their bodies, she said, which makes young bicyclists more vulnerable to brain damage.

"(The head) really is a missile," she said. "If they go flying, you know what's going to hit first."

Angell and other members of the county's traffic safety coalition are pleased that Gov. Wilson on Friday signed into law a bill requiring bicyclists under 18 to wear helmets.

The law takes effect Jan. 1, but during a one-year grace period, violators may receive citations from police and warnings but no fines from the courts, said Watsonville Traffic Officer Darren Thompson. After that, kids riding bikes without helmets will face fines up to \$25 per offense. One in seven American children suffers head injuries in bicycle-related incidents, and head injuries account for three out of four of all serious injuries or deaths from bicycle crashes across the nation, the traffic safety coalition reported.

The most recent data available for Santa Cruz County indicates that an average of three children a week went to hospitals by ambulance after bicycle accidents in 1991.

Helmets reduce the risk of head injuries by 85 percent and brain injuries by 88 percent, according to national data provided by the traffic safety coalition.

Watsonville ranks worst in the county for helmet use, according to a traffic safety coalition study six months ago. Only one bicyclist out of 100 observed was wearing a helmet.

Children can receive a variety of injuries in bicycle crashes, including broken bones, bruises, cuts and scrapes. Torn spleens are relatively common when a child takes a handlebar in the abdomen while flying over the handlebars, Angell said.

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But it is damage to the brain that is the most difficult to repair, and it is the brain that can be most easily protected, by wearing a helmet.

Two years ago, Matt Cody, a 13-year-old Santa Cruz paper boy, crashed his bike and landed head-first on the pavement during an early-morning paper run. He was not wearing a helmet, and the impact caused a large bruise and a blood clot on his brain, and left him in a deep coma for three weeks, said his mother, Tapati Sarasvati.

Surgeons opened up the boy's skull, which had remained unfractured in the crash, and removed the clot.

"He had a fairly large area — about the size of my hand — of his skull missing when he came home," Sarasvati said.

Surgeons at Stanford Medical

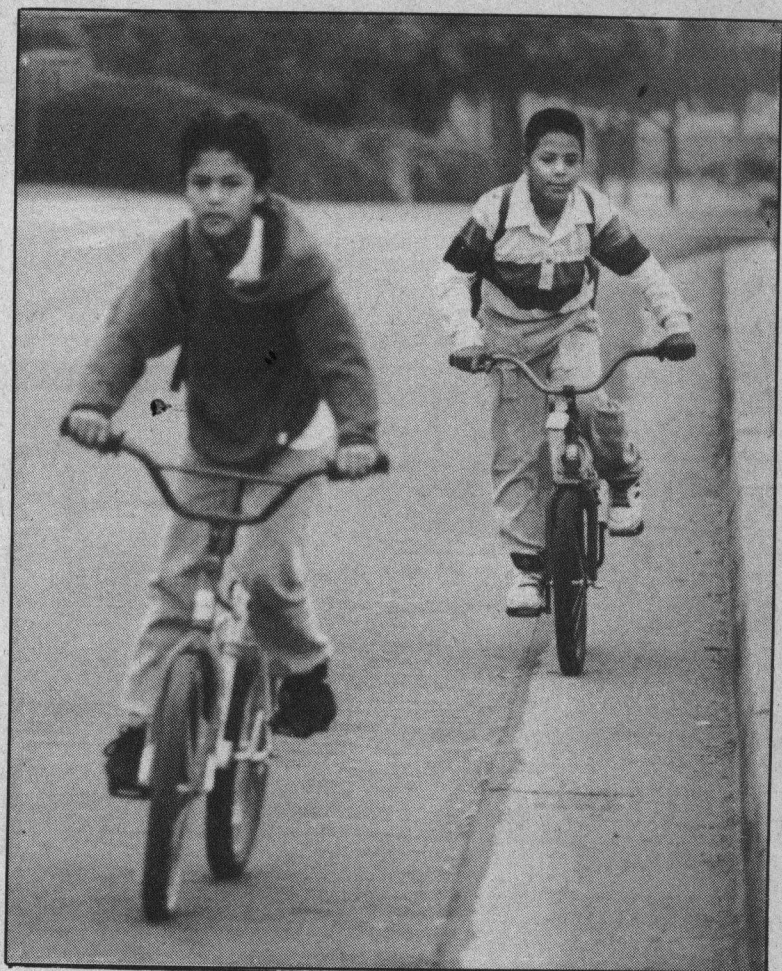
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— Lisa Angell, pediatric liaison nurse

Center replaced the missing piece when Cody's brain began to heal, she said.

The left side of Cody's body was totally paralyzed from his brain damage, a condition that lasted several months before he began to recover, she said. Most of the paralysis is gone now, his mother said, but "his left arm is never going to be terribly useful."

Sarasvati believes parents must watch their children closely to make sure they are wearing helmets when they ride, even enlisting the help of friends and neighbors and making threats of grounding or bicycle deprivation. Her son had a helmet, but because he knew she was still sleeping while he did his paper route, he did not put it on, she said.



Mike McCollum

Ari Dias, 10, and Julio Lopez, 11, on their way to Rolling Hills School sans helmets. After Jan. 1, their bare-headed bike riding will be illegal.

Many people don't buy helmets for their children because of the price, said Leslie Goodfriend, a health educator in the traffic safety coalition. That problem is particularly apparent among poor families in Watsonville, who may worry more about providing food and shelter for their kids than bicycle helmets, she said.

Sales staff at Kmart and

straight across the forehead and fastened snugly, said Lisa Angell.

Traffic safety coalition members are considering several ways to promote helmet use, including more education in schools, bulk purchases of helmets to cut expense, and getting grants from the state to buy and distribute helmets for free or as "loaners" to poor families, Goodfriend said.

The new helmet law earmarks more than 70 percent of money received from helmet-law fines for bicycle safety programs and grants to low-income families so they can buy helmets for their children.

A "shotgun blast" bicycle safety program conducted by Watsonville police Sept. 29 has greatly increased helmet use among Watsonville children, said officer Thompson, a member of the traffic safety coalition.

The program targeted 11,000 kids in 19 schools throughout the Pajaro Valley school district, and emphasized helmet use, Thompson said. Visual observation since the program indicates that about 40 percent of Watsonville kids are now wearing helmets when they ride.

The days of "mercy" are over for Watsonville cyclists, children and adults alike, Thompson said. Police will be issuing citations for bicycle-related violations, and they will start ticketing children for breaking the helmet law starting in January, although there will be no fines until the next year, he said.

Mike's Bikes in Watsonville said only about half of the parents who buy bikes for their children buy helmets too, in spite of suggestions by sales staff.

"They just figure it isn't as big a safety factor as it really is," said Doug Rockey, manager of Mike's Bikes.

Owning and wearing a helmet does not guarantee protection from head injury, especially if the helmet is not worn properly, Goodfriend said.

Many children tip their helmets back for reasons of style, exposing their foreheads and leaving the straps too loose, so the helmet will do little to protect the head from impact, she said, noting that she has seen children wearing their helmets with the fastening straps completely undone.

Bike helmets should be worn