



CLICK HERE FOR DISPLAY AD INFO



Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram KENNEBEC JOURNAL Morning Sentinel

Hello, m | Preferences | Log Out

HOME

- > MAINEJOBS
- > REAL ESTATE
- > WHEELS
- > MARKETPLACE
- > Place an Ad

NEWS

- Local and State
- Midday/4PM Reports
- AP Wire
- Week in Photos

WEATHER

- 5-day Forecast
- On the Ocean

SPORTS

- High Schools
- Red Sox
- Sea Dogs

BUSINESS

- News
- Blogs
- Maine News Direct
- Classifieds

ENTERTAINMENT

- Calendar
- Movies
- Dining
- Music
- Theater
- Art

TRAVEL

- Maine Regions
- From Away
- Vacation Rentals
- Lodging Guide

OUTDOORS

- Hiking
- Fishing
- Trail Head
- Campground Guide

BLOGS

- Late Hits
- Kid Tracks
- A Dog's Life
- More blogs

20 BELOW

- Teen Blogs
- One-Minute Wonders
- Reindeer Rock-off

MAINEJOBS

- Search Jobs
- Post a Job
- News and Resources
- Employer Profiles



Choose an activity:

Biking

Sunday, September 3, 2006

[E-mail this story to a friend](#)

Safety comes first with child in tow

Also on this page:
[Reader Comments](#)

By Melissa Kim,

[Copyright](#) © 2006 Blethen Maine Newspapers Inc.

Of all the biking questions that people ask me, one of the most common is about my bike trailer. I have a 2-year-old boy, and we ride as often as we can. Everywhere we've been this summer, from Mount Desert Island to Montreal, people have asked about the trailer.

Before we got it, we did a lot of research. I was not able to find any definitive studies about the safety of child carriers. But I have collected a lot of expert advice, industry opinion, anecdotal information and firsthand experience, which I thought I'd share with people who want to take their little ones on a bike.

First question: When is your child big enough? All the experts say that your kid should be at least 1 year old. We were tempted, big time, to start sooner, and plenty of folks do, but you just have to watch your kid's head and neck bouncing up and down once to realize that the doctors are right: Babies' necks are simply not strong enough, even with lots of padding.

Remember, there's more bounce and bump for them than there is for you. You are not seated right over the rear wheel, or in a low trailer on a fulcrum several feet behind the bike, so you might not realize how bumpy the ride is for your passenger.

GET A HELMET; IT'S THE LAW

Once the kid is old enough, get a lightweight toddler helmet. Helmets are not a choice: Maine's Bicycle Safety Education Act requires youths 15 and under to wear helmets when riding bikes on public roads and bikeways.

A helmet should have either a CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission) or a Snell sticker, meaning that it meets strict industry safety standards. The helmet should come with lots of padding inserts so you can adjust the fit as your child's head grows. The fit should be snug, and the helmet should sit level on the head. Get a bike shop pro to help with a fitting.

Next question: What kind of carrier is best? You have basically two options: a child seat mounted on the bike or a bike trailer.

REAL ESTATE

Renting
Buying
Town Info
Moving Here
Retiring Here

WHEELS

Classifieds
Resources and Info
Featured Dealers

MILESTONES

Graduations
Celebrations
Obituaries

MARKETPLACE

Classifieds
Special Sections

ADVERTISING

5 Reasons
Advertising Products

MEMBER CENTER

Press Herald
Sunday Telegram
Kennebec Journal
Morning Sentinel
MaineToday.com



Network Affiliate

Each has its pros and cons, and what's best for you depends on where and how you ride your bike. Either way, you should be an experienced, safe and confident cyclist and have a well-maintained bike with good brakes and a strong drive train.

Bicycle organizations don't like to endorse one over the other, though the League of American Bicyclists says "until about the age of five, kids should ride in a child seat, or better yet, a trailer." Whether you choose a trailer or a child seat, it should meet or exceed the standards set by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM). Look for the ASTM sticker (on a child seat, ASTM F1625; on a trailer, ASTM F1975).

TRAILER TALK

A trailer rides low to the ground, has its own wheels and frame, sits well behind your bike and has room for your child to carry toys, books and snacks. If you fall over, the trailer will most likely stay upright. You need to remember to take turns wide and to look for potholes and bumps on either side of your wheel.

Trailers aren't great for tight maneuvering on crowded streets with lots of traffic, but are great for bike paths, quiet streets and longer rides during your child's nap time (as long as your child has good head support). They offer more protection from the elements than bike seats. Though a trailer is more expensive than a bike seat, you can always use it to haul groceries or supplies once your child has outgrown it.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO CONSIDER

Hitches: Some trailers attach to the seat post on your bike, while others attach with a special hub through the axle of your rear wheel. Most people agree that lower (via the axle) is better. Make sure this hitch is flexible, so the trailer stays upright if you fall, but stable enough to handle stress. We have two hubs, so it's easy to attach the trailer to either my or my husband's bike (a big advantage over a bike seat affixed to one bike).

Harnesses: Some trailers have five-point harnesses (a lap belt and shoulder harness); others have only a lap belt. More is better.

Flags: Make sure the trailer has reflectors and a tall, bright-colored flag to increase visibility on the road. Drivers say they don't always see the low-riding trailers.

Helmets: Many people say their kids find it unbearable to wear a helmet inside a trailer. In a lot of cases, this is because the backrest is made of a stiff fabric that pushes the helmet and your kid's head forward. Look for a trailer with a mesh section or recessed space in the back that allows room for the helmet.

Screens: A dad at the playground, inspecting my trailer, told me he'd bought a cheap trailer and that the cover simply did not protect his kid from road dirt and dust. Make sure there is a fine mesh screen that keeps grit out but lets air circulate. I also have a sun shade and a rain cover.

Other fancy bits: Some trailers come with shock absorbers that you can adjust according to the weight of your child. Outer and inner storage areas are nice and can be a big advantage over a

child seat. Some trailers have quick-release wheels and fold easily. Most come with stroller and jog stroller attachments. Find the features that will make it easy for you to get up and go.

SEAT SAFETY

A bicycle-mounted child carrier is typically secured to a rack that is attached to your seat post and frame. The child must be able to hold his/her head up, but must weigh less than 40 pounds. It's a good idea to have a bike shop professional install the seat.

Pat Hackleman of Kennebunk's Cape-Able Bike Shop cautions, "sometimes baby seats will not mount to an adult bike that is small. My two cents is that enclosed trailers are safe, more stable and can attach to any sized bike."

However, folks I talked to who prefer seats say they like having their child nearby; it can be harder to communicate with a child who is inside a trailer. One Portland dad with a 2 1/2-year-old girl told me he felt she was less vulnerable and that he was able to maneuver quickly if he needed to. Seats are also much less expensive than trailers.

Because you are now carrying weight high over your rear wheel, the handling of the bike is greatly altered. The center of gravity shifts, and maneuverability and stability are major things to reckon with. You'll need to allow for greater braking distances. Also, one mom said she lowered her seat height so that her feet could reach the ground easily. It's worth practicing with a sack of potatoes strapped to the seat; I practiced with our trailer by putting a 50-pound bag of dog food in it.

One of the greatest challenges is mounting/dismounting; lean the bike against something stable, and don't take your eyes off it once the kid is strapped in to the seat.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

Helmets: The child has to wear one. So should you. Remember, your child is several feet off the ground. Picture what will happen if your bike falls over. Visualize the arc of your kid's head and imagine the force of an impact.

Lap belts: The belt should be child-proof, and a shoulder harness is an added bonus.

Support: The back should be high enough to support your kid's head. Extra padding in the seat makes the ride more comfortable.

Spoke protection: The spokes on your rear wheel should be covered by the seat so that your child's feet can't get caught in them.

Maintenance: One dad I know says it's important to check the nuts and bolts on the seat. "Once during a ride," he says, "I looked back and saw to my horror that three of the four bolts holding my son's seat on had dropped out, and the fourth had lost its nut."

All these safety issues notwithstanding, the whole point is to have fun. If you love to bike, you'll want your kids to love it, too. So make them a part of the adventure, stop often and enjoy yourself. A Portland dad with two girls who swears it is the best

way to move kids around, no contest, says "they love it, I love it, it's a hoot."

Melissa Kim, a freelance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). Her 2-year-old boy rides in a Chariot Cougar trailer. She welcomes comments at: bikes@melissakim.com.

Reader comments

Post your comment here:

There are not yet any reader comments. Use the form below to submit your comment and it will appear here.

Post a Comment

You must be a registered user of MaineToday.com to post a comment. [Register](#). Please complete all information. Your e-mail address is collected for recording purposes only and will not be displayed on web pages. Your comments will be reviewed by MaineToday.com and posted within one business day. [Guidelines](#)

Your name

Your town & state

 ,

Your e-mail

(will not be displayed)

Your comment

Questions to invite reader comments are written and edited by the MaineToday.com staff. If you have questions, concerns or ideas about the reader comments on this or any other article, [e-mail us](#).

Your phone

MaineToday.com reader comments are occasionally printed in the newspaper. If you would like your comment to be considered by the paper, you need to give your phone number for verification purposes. The number will remain private and will not be printed by the paper or MaineToday.com. It is not required for comments printed online only.

[To top of page](#)



[Questions/Comments?](#)

Copyright © 2006, Blethen Maine Newspapers, Inc.