

No Fun Allowed, Experts Say; Obsessive Worry Chases a Fad on Wheels

By Janny Scott

Sept. 24, 2000

See the article in its original context from September 24, 2000 , Section 1, Page 41 Buy Reprints

[VIEW ON TIMESMACHINE](#)

TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home delivery and digital subscribers.

There seems to be a law of contemporary life that goes something like this: any time too many people start having too much fun, they must be in danger of something. Especially if they include the kind of people who like Buzz Lightyear Band-Aids and toothpaste the flavor of bubble gum.

In keeping with that law, the widely remarked upon infatuation of under-age New Yorkers with the collapsible scooter, that seemingly benign equivalent of a sporty convertible for the palate-expander set, has brought with it the inevitable: scoote backlash.

In the wake of reports of a 700 percent rise since May in scooter injuries treated in hospital emergency rooms across the country, scooters have now joined Pokemon cards, Tamagotchi virtual pets and even Harry Potter in the ranks of recent kid obsessions that have inspired varying degrees of dread

Scooter scare stories have proliferated over the last few weeks. New York school

have promulgated stern "no scooter" policies. Sporting goods stores have moved to turn scooter anxiety to their advantage, cultivating a whole new market in scooter safety accessories

"Be Careful!" warned Modell's, the sporting goods chain, in 120-point type in a full-page ad in The Daily News shortly after the injury statistics came out. "We Urge You to Exercise Caution While Riding Scooters." Which is to say, hurry to buy helmets, elbow pads and kneepads at Modell's, with a 25 percent "scooter safety discount."

Like its predecessors, the reaction against scooters appears to have multiple sources, including the statistical certainty that when enough people do anything, downsides will emerge, as well as what some say is a tendency on the part of America's baby-boomer-dominated culture to obsess about children's safety.

On one level, the reaction arises out of a simple mathematical fact. If 1,000 people are riding scooters or taking a new antidepressant or driving a new vehicle, and one of them is injured, who will know? But if a million people are riding or ingesting or driving and 1,000 are injured, word gets out.

A fad with a downside is news, especially if the downside is counterintuitive -- if, say, something innocuous looking is less so than it had seemed. Suddenly, the story is everywhere -- on the Internet, 24-hour cable news channels and all-news radio, in newspapers and magazines.

"We can just flood the country with an alert about foot scooters," said Dr. Edward Christopherson, a psychologist at Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, Mo., in trying to explain "the reason we get so nutty." Media outlets "have to do something to keep the commercials from sliding together."

With the inevitability of homework, the boom was lowered the day after Labor Day, when Ann Brown, the chairwoman of the Consumer Product Safety Commission, appeared on the ABC program "Good Morning America" and announced that the commission had found that in August alone, more than

4,000 scooter-related injuries were treated in hospital emergency rooms.

The interview with Ms. Brown and a news release issued that same day set off a wave of publicity: headlines like "Scooters: Hell on Wheels" and emergency room doctors ruminating darkly on television about head trauma and lacerations. When schools in New York began opening several days later, some had decided to outlaw scooters altogether.

At Middle School 104 near Gramercy Park, the situation had looked ominous as far back as June. The office of the principal, Margaret Struk, had become a parking lot for 50 scooters a day. Then a student broke an arm falling off a scooter, and others' scooters were stolen during a ride home. When the injury statistics came out, Ms. Struk said, she sent home a "no scooters" note

By the Friday after Labor Day, Modell's was running its ad

But it was unclear how much concern was warranted. The Consumer Product Safety Commission's report of a 700 percent increase in injuries since May was impressive, but relatively few people had even owned scooters before then. The commission did not estimate how many Americans had taken up scooter riding since early June, but the number appears to be in the millions.

A source familiar with sales at Razor USA, an American arm of the company that manufactures the most popular version of the collapsible scooter, said Razor USA had been shipping 100,000 scooters a week since June.

Aaron Fleishaker, a senior vice president for Modell's, estimated that his New York-based company alone had sold more than 125,000 scooters since May.

"How available was comparative risk data?" asked Jennifer S. Lerner, a professor of decision science and psychology at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. "In the same month, how many emergency room visits were there for injuries from bikes? How do scooters compare to skateboards?"

Ken Giles, a spokesman for the commission, said 60,000 skateboard injuries

were treated in hospital emergency rooms in 1999, and 95,000 in-line skating injuries. But he said the commission could not say how many people are using skateboards, skates or scooters. "We have the numerator but we don't have the denominator," he said.

As for the severity of the injuries, 97 percent of the injured were reported to have been treated and released. Most injuries were described as bruises, scrapes, cuts strains and sprains. Twenty-nine percent were fractures and dislocations. Twenty-nine percent were injuries to the head and face.

"Show the reporter your knees with all your scooting boo-boos," Sheila Fox instructed her 6-year-old son, Evan Myar, one afternoon earlier this month in Central Park. Evan, revealing a pair of slightly mottled knees, had on a helmet, slightly askew.

There are those who make the case that modern parents are a little nutty about children's safety. Some suggest that shrinking families and expanding incomes have fed a tendency to try to "childproof the world," an argument that has been made in recent years by Nick Gillespie, the editor in chief of Reason, a libertarian monthly magazine.

Mr. Gillespie said Americans "talk about children today in American society as if they're living in a Mad Max universe, when in fact the overwhelming majority of kids have never had it so good." Risks get blown out of proportion, he said.

"After years of people complaining about kids today being house-bound and becoming fat loads on the couch, we have the scooter, which is a tremendous physical activity that seems to have gotten kids out of the house," Mr. Gillespie said. "Now there is this subtle disconnect: 'Oh, God, they're out there playing. All kinds of bad things can happen.' "

Many adult New Yorkers, however, appear to be less than bowled over by scooter naysaying. In scooter-dense neighborhoods like Manhattan's Upper West and Upper East Sides, they can be found everywhere, scooting and supervising scooting, nary a helmet or kneepad in sight.

Some said protective equipment probably made sense. But they also said that whatever risks scooters posed, with or without protection, were risks they would choose to take.

"I don't want to sound cavalier," said Joe Meaney, in Union Square with his son Alex Savits, 9, who had been riding his Razor, helmet-free, in loops across an expanse of unpopulated macadam. "But I think children need a certain bit of risk to mature into thoughtful, cautious, somewhat adventurous adults."

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 24, 2000, Section 1, Page 41 of the National edition with the headline: No Fun Allowed, Experts Say; Obsessive Worry Chases a Fad on Wheels