

Following ATV rules can make riding safe

By Joe Baird and
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Fred Christensen first heard about the crash on the radio that day in 1983, and instantly thought of his son, Todd, on his way to band practice on his ATV.

The father's instincts proved correct. Todd had died in a head-on collision with a car. Christensen has spent the last two decades since spreading the gospel about ATV safety.

"My wife and I decided that there was no such thing as an accident . . . that there is a purpose for everything," he says. "We just needed to find a positive purpose."

Christensen, of Annabella, near Richfield, stays busy with his calling. Off-highway vehicle use in Utah has surged in the last decade. Christensen and fellow volunteers have trained upward of 30,000 kids as part of a statewide ATV education program.

Even so, far too many people continue to be killed and injured using off-road vehicles. Fifty-one Utahns died in ATV mishaps between 1999 and 2003, and more than 1,000 suffered injuries that required hospitalization, according to state figures.

Utah Parks and Recreation officials say that ATV-related deaths, while on the rise, are not growing at nearly the same rate as OHV sales and registrations in Utah. Still, Eric Stucki, the state's OHV education specialist, says casualties would be lower if users observed the rules listed on virtually every machine: wear protective gear, don't double ride, stay off the pavement and don't drink or use drugs.

Even if all the rules are observed, ATVs are risky - particularly for children.

"Between 2002 and 2004, we admitted 102 kids in ATV accidents, and 30 of those children had to go to intensive care," says Douglas Nelson, an emergency room physician at Primary Children's Medical Center.

"What we usually see are head injuries - particularly if they're not wearing a helmet - or abdominal trauma from rollovers. These are not lightweight vehicles. Nobody does well when a refrigerator falls on them."

The risk factor for kids on ATVs is so great that no child under 8 should be allowed on them, argues Cindy Bemis, a staffer with the state health department's violence and injury prevention program.

"The fact that 527 children under the age of 10 were seen in Utah emergency departments for ATV injuries over the past five years - more than 100 a year - means parents should rethink allowing them to ride on ATVs," Bemis says.

"There is no doubt in my mind that every time I teach a class, I am saving a life," says Christensen. "I talk about my son in the class and that seems to help get their attention."

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