



STF Guidance Note 10

Wearing of Helmets in Snowsports.

Members offering ski and snowsports need to be aware of the recent advice issued by the Outdoor Education Advisors Panel (OEAP). This follows the lead of the School and Youth Committee, Snowsports England.

This guidance was circulated at the recent Outdoor Advisors Conference and we are advised that the approach was universally accepted.

However, Martin Tomlinson, who with Alan Cottle, is the OEAP's lead on this, recognises the practical difficulties that will arise from an increasing demand for helmets, both for teachers and suppliers. In his email to me says: *"there has to be some recognition that this season will be a period of transition. It is to be hoped that the industry will do their best to accommodate the need to equip school / youth groups appropriately and to include the costs as part of the package. (as is the case with skis and boots etc.)"*

The OEAP Guidance to their members:

Helmet policy for snowsports

For a number of years there has been considerable debate on the subject of whether helmets should be worn for all snowsports (alpine skiing, snow-boarding, snow-blading). Until now, the same authorities have required only those that use snowboards or blades, or where the law of the country so dictates, to wear helmets. Currently, young people under the age of 14 must wear helmets in Italy and in parts of Austria.

The Federation Internationale de Ski (FIS) now strongly recommends that all skiers and snowboarders, regardless of ability and age, use helmets. The AfPE (Association for Physical Education) has recently also advised its members that helmets should be worn. The majority of the members of the Snowsports England Schools and Youth Committee voted to recommend to the governing body that the wearing of helmets should be recommended.

Some people believe that wearing helmets can create an increased sense of invulnerability and may reduce hearing and peripheral vision. Some also are concerned that ill-fitting or badly designed helmets could cause injury and leave the person or body that insisted that they were worn, open to litigation.

The comparatively little research carried out is not conclusive. It suggests that the wearing of a helmet may protect against minor injuries and be useful in lower speed collisions. The evidence suggests that a helmet will offer little or no protection in the event of a high speed collision.

Helmets will probably never have a serious impact on mitigating death due to head injury since the typical fatal scenario has so much kinetic energy that it will overwhelm the protective elements of the helmet. But the good news is that fatal injuries in snowsports are quite rare—less than one in 1.5 million days of activity.(Jasper Shealy , Professor Emeritus, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester NY.)

Yet it is a FIS rule that ski racers and those training to race must wear helmets, perhaps because it would appear ridiculous for anyone travelling at high speed not to do so.

Teachers and ski group leaders have been in a difficult position over this with some parents expecting helmets to be worn because of a general belief that wearing a helmet must increase safety. Given this uncertainty, it is recommended that the following position be considered:

All participants in snowsports should wear helmets. This should include both supervisory staff and students/young people.

The only times that this is not recommended would be when a risk assessment clearly showed that the wearing of a helmet was unnecessary and would or might interfere with the activity. For example, a helmet would not be required for cross-country skiing (langlauf, ski de fond). Helmets may also not be required for staff, who are not wearing skis, assisting people on or off uplift or "collecting" a group at the bottom of a nursery area. This may also be true for complete beginners learning in a segregated, gentle area through which faster skiers and snowboarders could not pass. If in doubt, helmets should be worn.

Helmets must be correctly fitted and appropriate for purpose. Staff should learn how to fit helmets so that they become competent and are able to spot if they are being worn incorrectly. Where helmets are rented, they should be fitted by the person renting the equipment to you (as are skis etc). If a parent supplies the helmet, they are responsible for it being in a serviceable condition (at the start of the snowsports tour at least) and fitting correctly. Staff should still check this.

It is possible that hire shops/tour operators will not have sufficient stocks of helmets in place so it is essential to discuss this with them in plenty of time so that adequate stocks can be made available. It may be necessary to adopt a sensible risk assessed approach during the forthcoming season. A judgement, made by an experienced school group leader with advice from the local ski school, may be appropriate under particular circumstances especially where there are insufficient helmets of appropriate quality. It is expected that this will be less of an issue over time.

Of far greater importance than protective equipment is following the FIS Ski-way Code, ensuring that skiers and boarders are in control and that their speed is limited to their ability and the situation.

It must always be made absolutely clear to parents that skiing has inherent risks, that falls will happen and that people can get hurt through no fault of their own or anyone else. They should also understand that the wearing of a helmet is likely to make little difference in terms of the potential for serious injuries. By agreeing to their child taking part, they acknowledge and accept that these risks are present.

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