

O P - E D

Beware Your Local Carnival

By KATHY FACKLER

ON May 22, 7-year-old Stephanie Dieudonne of New Rochelle was killed when she was thrown from a spinning amusement ride called the Mind Scrambler at Rye Playland.

Her death was tragic — all the more so because it probably won't be the last amusement park fatality. As Westchester families venture out this year to established amusement parks like Playland and to the small, traveling carnivals that pop up in local parks and fairgrounds on the weekend, it's worth asking how safe the rides are — and what can be done to make them safer.

Each year, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, 10,000 people are injured on mechanical and inflatable amusement rides. Half of those accidents involve children under 14. Five months before the Rye incident, the commission began investigating restraint systems on portable amusement rides, an inquiry prompted by serious accidents at traveling carnivals, including the ejection of a 5-year-old girl from the Wacky Worm in Danbury, Conn., in 2001; the partial ejection of an 8-year-old girl from the same ride in Hamburg, N.Y., two years earlier; the ejection of an 8-year-old girl from the Twister in Indiana in 2001; and the ejection of a 6-year-old boy from the Wipeout in California in 2001. Accidents like these happen at theme parks also, but the commission does not investigate them — in fact, no federal agency does.

In each case the rides had fixed metal lap bars, and the children — all of whom survived their injuries — met the minimum height requirement set by the ride manufacturer.

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But if a lap bar doesn't fit closely, the motion of the ride can cause a child to slip out. Loose-fitting lap bars also allow young children to stand up or pull their legs up on the seat while a ride is moving. According to witnesses, that is what caused Stephanie Dieudonne's death.

Parents need to understand that amusement rides aren't subject to the same child safety standards that apply to cars, bike trailers, strollers and other vehicles used by their chil-

Safety standards for kids are lax on rides.

dren. Seat belts are not required on thrill rides, even those intended for very young children. Allowing children as young as 6 to ride alone and unrestrained in the dark on a rapidly spinning machine might be risky, but it's perfectly legal and complies with all industry safety standards.

Parents also need to understand that oversight — even basic data on park rides — is limited. The product safety commission, for example, cannot include Stephanie's accident in its investigation of restraint systems because she died at an amusement park rather than at a carnival. Amusement park rides have been exempt from federal safety regulation since 1981. And a bill sponsored by Representative Ed Markey of Massachusetts to repeal this exemption remains stalled in subcommittee. Rye Playland decided on its own after Stephanie's death to equip the Mind Scrambler with seat belts that fit closely against children.

Safety standards for all amusement rides are developed by a 400-member committee of ride manufacturers, owner-operators, industry lawyers and consultants, regulatory

officials and one consumer advocate. Those standards require parks and carnivals to carry out a program of maintenance, testing and inspection based on manufacturers' recommendations. In addition, some states inspect fixed-site rides annually and portable rides at each setup and have authority to close rides that do not meet industry standards — in New York, the state Department of Labor has that responsibility. Not all states have ride inspectors, however, and New York inspectors can enforce compliance only with industry standards. Safety issues that are ignored in the standards cannot be challenged by state inspectors.

This lack of comprehensive regulation means that parents have to look carefully at the belts and straps that hold in their children while on a ride. Too often, parents don't bother to check how well the ride contains their children when they put them on attended amusement rides.

When deciding whether a ride is safe, parents should base their decision on what they know about their child, not on what a sign says or what other parents are doing. For instance, can your child follow directions and stay seated? Is she a risk-taker? How well does he fit within the restraint system? If a child is too young to cross a busy street alone, he's probably too young to be on a thrill ride by himself — even if the park says he's tall enough or old enough to do so.

In the current regulatory climate, it's unlikely that an agency devoted to amusement park ride safety is about to emerge. Given this, parents and state agencies are going to have to close the gap. Consumers should demand state regulations that give inspectors authority to ensure public safety, not just enforce standards developed by the industry. Parents should take the time to learn how to keep their children safe around amusement rides.

Children want to experiment. On an amusement park ride, though, this kind of experimentation can end in death. □