

Inflatable rides spark child-safety worries

Low start-up costs can make oversight tricky, officials say

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The inflatable moon bounce and giant slide, bringers of joy to birthday parties and fairs, have more than doubled in number in Ohio since 2000. With that increase came plenty of safety concerns, said state and inflatable-industry officials.

Commercial inflatable rides account for nearly half of the safety-related fines Ohio levies against amusement businesses each year.

In 2000, the state inspected about 700 of those rides. In 2007, it inspected more than 1,400, although experts are sure that some escaped official notice. Rental companies can cross state lines, set up a moon bounce for a party, and take it down before inspectors know about it.

In 1997, the federal Consumer Product Safety Commission estimated that 1,300 inflatable-amusement-ride injuries occurred nationwide. In 2004, the last year the commission did a thorough study, it estimated that there were 4,900 injuries, including injuries from small, personal inflatable rides.

Ohio has recorded only a few injuries in those years, but the state's reporting criteria are less inclusive than the federal commission's.

Safety violations are found with less than 1 percent of inspected rides, according to the Ohio Department of Agriculture, which is in charge of amusement-ride safety.

The rides have not become less safe, people in the industry said. Established rental businesses, fairs and indoor facilities have an interest in being as careful as possible, both to encourage customers to return and to keep insurance rates low. But it takes such a small investment to begin an inflatable-ride company that some people who aren't as interested in safety get involved, industry officials say.

"You can buy a bounce for \$2,500 and make that back in a good weekend," said Jim Barber, a spokesman for the National Association of Amusement Ride Safety Officials. "You can get into this business easier than you can into other amusement businesses."

That accounts for most of the growth, though it has been slower in Ohio than in some other states.

A couple from Maryland appeared before the Ohio Advisory Council on Amusement Ride Safety this month, arguing that Ohio's inflatable-ride laws are too strict, compared with other states. The couple wanted to open an indoor inflatable center in Mansfield that would have several rides in one room, overseen by two attendants.

Ohio requires that each inflatable have its own attendant. The members unanimously rejected the couple's request for an exception.

"They may be the greatest people in the world, but lack of knowledge was a problem," longtime safety-council member Geary Bates said of the couple. "They didn't know much about insurance. They didn't seem to have their arms around it."

Bates owns Bates Amusement Inc. in Wintersville, which has owned inflatables, as has Bill Prowant's Durant Enterprises Inc. of Dupont. Prowant, who also is a member of the safety council, and Bates said inflatables have their place in the amusement industry: People have fun on them, and they are easy to set up and use safely.

Theresa Robenalt, 46, of Upper Arlington, threw a party for her daughter's eighth birthday at Pump It Up in Plain City, the best-known indoor inflatable facility in central Ohio. She said the environment seemed well-controlled: Employees were in the inflatables with the children, making sure they followed the rules.

But her son once attended a birthday party that featured a rented inflatable in a backyard. He got a bloody nose after running into another child.

"I've seen them at church picnics, with a bunch of kids in one at the same time," Robenalt said of inflatables. "It seems they might be less regulated in those situations."

Prowant said parents need to supervise their children on inflatables, as they would on any other ride. It's a parent's responsibility to make sure a child follows the rules, just as it's the operator's responsibility, he said.

It's also important for a parent to use common sense. If a ride doesn't appear safe, don't let a child on it.

"Parents need to use good judgment," he said. "Parents need to pay attention."

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Safety checklist

How to judge whether

an inflatable ride is being properly operated:

- Rules are clearly posted.
- There is at least one attendant.
- The inflatable is anchored to the floor or ground.
- Children are segregated by size: Small kids play with small kids, big kids with big kids.
- The posted maximum occupancy isn't exceeded.
- Attendants allow children to play only in brief shifts; a child tired from jumping around is more likely to be injured.

Source: industry officials