

How safe are teenagers on two wheels?

The only way to decide whether motorcycling is safe for a teenage son is to try it yourself.

By Liz Vercoe

Published: 3:29PM BST 17 May 2010

After 16 years of keeping my child alive amid London's traffic - crossing roads at lights, insisting on high-visibility cycling at night - it was pretty terrifying when he announced that he wanted his first motor to have two wheels rather than four. But as I started to protest I realised I had lots of instinctive fears but no facts.

My son was intent on sampling the free one-hour "introduction to motorcycling" sessions, available nationwide through the motorcycle industry's "Get On" campaign, so I thought it was time to learn about biking.



Novice Liz Vercoe boards a learner-friendly Suzuki to experience motorcycling for herself
Photo: David Rose

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That's how I found myself crammed into a helmet, a jacket with what felt like a tea-tray stuffed up the back, and heavy duty gloves, riding a 125cc Suzuki Van Van at walking pace, while expert motorcyclists whizzed past.

I'm a London driver and my heart sinks whenever a home-delivery moped appears in my wing mirror, weaving uncertainly to the front at traffic lights. Then you see the L-plate and know that when they set off it won't be fast - or straight.

How different to the leather-clad motorcycle riders who command, and sometimes commandeer, the road as if they're

articulated trucks. Are they the same breed? Can one become the other?

"It's important to know your teenager's mindset," says Phil Edwards, Cheshire police motorcyclist and national BikeSafe coordinator. "There are two groups at real risk because it's much harder for them to take safety seriously - the car aspirers, who can't wait and just want wheels, and the car rejecters who, when public transport let them down, are pushed towards a motorbike."

In both cases, because motorcycling's not first choice, there's less interest in the stuff that makes it safer. These two groups are most likely to get fed up with the time it takes to clamber in and out of protective clothing (the minimum is a motorcycle jacket with elbow, shoulder and back protectors, leather palmed gloves and strong boots), and with how hot it feels on a summer's day. They won't guard their BSI kitemarked helmet with their life, even though dropping it can render it useless, or wear it correctly fastened.

They're also more likely to do a one-day Compulsory Basic Training (CBT) course and stick with their L-plates for two years (at which point they have to retake the CBT) than take the DSA motorcycle test to get their full licence.

On the road, in Phil's experience, they'll either timidly creep along the gutter or, more dangerously, swarm in a group jostling each other rather than watching the traffic.

Group riding is one of the top five causes of motorbike accidents. The others, he adds, are "filtering between vehicles, junctions, cornering and overtaking".

It was time to try it out for myself. The "Get On" sessions, available at local training centres across the country free of charge, include a safety briefing, instruction on how the bike works - to get the full experience I picked a bike with clutch, gears, hand and footbrakes rather than a "twist and go" scooter or moped - and the correct gear to wear.

First I pushed the Suzuki to get used to its weight - pretty heavy - and the feel of the clutch and brakes. Then it was time to get on, start the engine and engage first gear.

My trainer, Chris "Pinky" O'Brien, walked alongside, with his hand in reach of the clutch should anything go wrong. It's horribly difficult to steer at that pace but basically it's to practise clutch control and stopping.

By then, stress plus a hot day was making it very uncomfortable inside my helmet and jacket, and I realised just how motivated a teenager would have to be to buy into the whole safety clothing thing. But after a few kangaroo leaps, I found I could ride steadily and slowly.

In fact it felt great and, in my mind at least, I looked every bit the presidential parade outrider. But unfortunately my hour was up. I'm not sure I'd tackle London traffic after a single day's training. Yet this is the common pattern of the CBT course, which costs about £150 and is necessary to ride on the road.

I was surprised to discover there's no further compulsory post-CBT training leading up to the test. So I'd opt for a CBT-plus course that follows up with a series of lessons that cost about £12 an hour.

If you're lucky, you'll also be near a police-run Scooter Safe course. As well as riding skills there's an emphasis on dress, since scooter riders are more likely to opt for shorts, T-shirt and flip-flops.

You only have to visit www.bare-bones.org (<http://www.bare-bones.org>) to see what a mess a rough road surface can make of the human body, even wearing jeans and trainers. So it's good news that scooters, like PGO's G-Max 50, are looking more bike-like and sporty. Suddenly safety clothes make sense and look in style.

Will I allow my son to ride a motorbike? I hope to persuade him to put it off for as long as possible because the older he is the more mature he'll be. But now I can share his enthusiasm and be better equipped to help him make the decisions that will keep him safe. That has to be better than a parent-teenage door-slamming stand off.

More information on getting on two wheels:

www.geton.co.uk (<http://www.geton.co.uk>)

www.bare-bones.org (<http://www.bare-bones.org>)

www.bikesafe.co.uk (<http://www.bikesafe.co.uk>)

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