



## ATV safety campaign focuses on children

Advocates urge no riders under 16 due to deaths, injuries

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**DAVE PARKS**

News staff writer

Already with two years of driving experience under his belt, 3-year-old Sammy Parker lost control of his small all-terrain vehicle seven weeks ago and was flung head-on into a tree.

Sammy's skull fractured, his brain bled and he appeared dead when his father, Heath Parker of Cullman, ran to his side.

"He was motionless, pretty much lifeless," Parker said Thursday, shortly after health advocates launched a statewide awareness campaign about the dangers of mixing ATVs with young children.

Fortunately, Sammy survived. He was rushed to Children's Hospital of Alabama and spent about a week there.

His experience wasn't uncommon. During the past eight years in Alabama, ATV accidents have claimed the lives of six children and severely injured 211 children, according to Dr. Donald Williamson, state health officer.

Alabama is one of three states that lack safety laws for ATVs, said the organizers of the awareness campaign. The group strongly recommends that no child younger than 16 be allowed to ride or drive ATVs.

"We routinely see ATV injuries in our trauma rooms," said Dr. Kathy Monroe, an emergency department physician at Children's. "All are children under the recommended age to drive these vehicles, and many are as young as 3 years old."

ATV traumas seen at Children's Hospital have increased 200 percent over the past 10 years, authorities said. In 2007, the emergency department saw an average of more than one injury a week caused by ATV accidents.

Sammy's accident occurred on a Saturday afternoon in Cullman. Sammy, who is almost 4, had been driving his 90-cc ATV around the house since he was 2, his father said.

The child was driving the ATV about 15 mph across the yard when he lost control, Parker said. "I don't know what happened."

The ATV twisted around, one wheel hung up on a root and two wheels reared into the air. Sammy, who was not wearing a helmet although he had one, was pitched head-on into a tree. He lay motionless and didn't appear to be breathing.

"We started praying right there," Parker said.

Sammy was first taken to Cullman Regional Medical Center and then quickly transferred to Children's Hospital with life-threatening injuries, his father said. He said plenty of prayers saved his son, who has recovered without disability.

"It's a miracle," Parker said.

Now Sammy is begging to drive his ATV again, but it's smashed up and in the garage. And that's exactly where it's going to stay, his father said.

"Anything can happen," he said. "We weren't as cautious as we should have been."

Organizers of the awareness campaign are distributing educational posters to all pediatric practices, health departments and school nurses. The statewide effort is being supported by the Alabama Department of Public Health, Children's Hospital of Alabama, the Injury Free Coalition for Kids, the Alabama Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and VOICES for Alabama's Children.

E-mail: [dparks@bhamnews.com](mailto:dparks@bhamnews.com)

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