

Sidecar Laws and Regulations

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The Complete Guide to Sidecar Motorcycle Laws in the United States

This comprehensive guide covers licensing requirements, passenger regulations, and equipment standards for operating a motorcycle with sidecar across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Understanding these laws is crucial for safe and legal sidecar operation.

- Important Disclaimer:** This document provides general guidance on sidecar regulations. Laws change frequently, and enforcement varies by jurisdiction. This information was published on December 27, 2025. Always verify current regulations with your local DMV or law enforcement agency before operating a sidecar motorcycle.

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The Universal "Big Three" Rules

Across nearly all 50 states and Washington D.C., three fundamental rules govern sidecar motorcycle operation. These form the foundation of sidecar law and apply unless specifically noted in state exceptions.

Licensing Requirements

You need a Class M (Motorcycle) License to operate a motorcycle with sidecar. However, there's a critical trap: taking your road test on a motorcycle with sidecar typically results in a "Restricted" Class M license, often labeled "3-Wheel Only."

Best Practice: Get your license on a standard 2-wheel motorcycle to maintain full riding privileges.

Registration Standards

The motorcycle itself is registered with the DMV. The sidecar is legally considered a detachable accessory, similar to saddlebags, and does not require its own title or registration plate in most jurisdictions.

Insurance Coverage

You must declare the sidecar to your insurance company as an accessory to ensure proper coverage. While it rarely requires a separate policy, failing to disclose it could void your coverage in an accident.

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Passenger Laws: The Footrest Rule

Passenger age requirements represent the most critical operational consideration for sidecar riders. The majority of states employ what's known as the "Footrest Rule," but several jurisdictions impose strict age minimums that significantly impact family riding.

The Standard Footrest Rule

In approximately 45 states, there is no minimum age requirement for motorcycle passengers. Instead, the law states: "If the passenger is tall enough to reach the footrests with feet flat, they can legally ride."

The Sidecar Advantage: Sidecars generally exempt you from the footrest rule entirely because passengers sit in an enclosed or semi-enclosed seat rather than straddling the motorcycle. This technically allows infants and toddlers to ride in sidecars in most states, provided they are properly restrained using a car seat secured directly to the sidecar frame.

Key Considerations

- Always use proper restraint systems for young children
- Secure car seats to the sidecar frame, not removable cushions
- Check your specific state for exceptions
- Child endangerment laws still apply even without specific age restrictions

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States With Strict Age Limits

While most states follow the footrest rule, several jurisdictions impose specific minimum age requirements for motorcycle passengers. Understanding these exceptions—and whether sidecars provide legal exemptions—is crucial for compliance.

State	General Age Rule	Sidecar Exemption?
Texas	Minimum age 5	YES - Children under 5 can ride in sidecars
Hawaii	Minimum age 7	NO - Age limit applies to sidecars
Washington	Minimum age 5	YES - Children under 5 can ride in sidecars
Louisiana	Minimum age 5	UNCLEAR - Gray area in statute
Arkansas	Minimum age 8	NO - Statute applies to sidecars explicitly

- **Texas Example:** Texas Transportation Code § 545.416 explicitly states that while children under 5 cannot ride on motorcycles, they are permitted in sidecars with proper restraints. This makes Texas one of the most family-friendly states for sidecar operation.

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Equipment Requirements for Legal Operation

Proper equipment installation is essential for legal sidecar operation. While requirements are generally straightforward, they vary by component and jurisdiction.



Lighting Systems

If the sidecar blocks the motorcycle's taillight or turn signals, the sidecar must have its own replacement lights. Most states require sidecars to have an independent taillight and brake light on the rear regardless of whether they obstruct the motorcycle's lights.



Brake Requirements

Most states, including California and Wisconsin, exempt sidecars from the "brakes on all wheels" requirement that applies to standard motorcycles. You typically do not need a brake on the sidecar wheel itself, though some riders install them for enhanced control.



Attachment Standards

Sidecars must be attached to the right side of the motorcycle to avoid interfering with oncoming traffic. The mounting system must be secure and regularly inspected for wear. Many states require periodic safety inspections of the attachment points.

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State-by-State Breakdown: Part 1

This section covers Alabama through Maryland, detailing helmet laws, special sidecar provisions, and licensing nuances. States marked as "Standard" follow the Universal Rules outlined earlier.

Alabama to Florida

- **Alabama:** Standard. Helmet required for all riders.
- **Alaska:** Standard. Helmet required under age 18.
- **Arizona:** Helmet under 18. Class M with "J" restriction if tested on sidecar.
- **Arkansas:**  Passenger must be 8+ years old. No sidecar exemption. Helmet under 21.
- **California:** Universal helmet law. Sidecar exempt from service brake requirement (CVC 26311).
- **Colorado:** Standard. Helmet under 18.
- **Connecticut:** Standard. Helmet under 18.
- **Delaware:** Standard. Helmet under 19.
- **Florida:** Helmet under 21 (unless \$10k insurance). Testing on sidecar restricts to 3-wheels.

Georgia to Maryland

- **Georgia:** Universal helmet law. Statute explicitly mentions sidecars for passengers who can't reach footrests.
- **Hawaii:**  Passenger must be 7+ years old. Helmet under 18.
- **Idaho:** Standard. Helmet under 18.
- **Illinois:** Standard. No helmet law.
- **Indiana:** Standard. Helmet under 18.
- **Iowa:** Standard. No helmet law.
- **Kansas:** Standard. Helmet under 18.
- **Kentucky:** Standard. Helmet under 21.
- **Louisiana:**  Minimum age 5. Universal helmet law.
- **Maryland:** Universal helmet law. Statute defines sidecar as "accessory."

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State-by-State Breakdown: Part 2

Continuing our comprehensive state analysis from Massachusetts through Wyoming. Pay special attention to states with unique inspection requirements or licensing endorsements.

Massachusetts to Pennsylvania

- **Massachusetts:** Universal helmet law.
- **Michigan:** Helmet under 21 (unless \$20k insurance).
- **Minnesota:** Standard. Helmet under 18.
- **Mississippi:** Universal helmet law.
- **Missouri:** Universal helmet law.
- **Montana:** Standard. Helmet under 18.
- **Nebraska:** Universal helmet law.
- **Nevada:** Universal helmet law.
- **New Jersey:** Universal helmet law. Strict inspection rules for sidecar lights.
- **New Mexico:** Standard. Helmet under 18.
- **New York:** Universal helmet law.
- **North Carolina:** Universal helmet law.
- **Ohio:** Helmet under 18 and first year of license.
- **Oregon:** Universal helmet law. Offers specific "Three-Wheel" endorsement.
- **Pennsylvania:** Standard. Helmet under 21.

South Carolina to Wyoming

- **South Carolina:** Helmet under 21. Class D may suffice for permanent 3-wheeler.
- **Tennessee:** Universal helmet law.
- **Texas:**  Min. age 5, BUT sidecars exempt. Helmet under 21.
- **Utah:** Standard. Helmet under 21.
- **Vermont:** Universal helmet law.
- **Virginia:** Universal helmet law.
- **Washington:**  Min. age 5, BUT sidecars exempt. Universal helmet law. Strict 2-wheel vs 3-wheel endorsements.
- **West Virginia:** Universal helmet law.
- **Wisconsin:** Helmet under 18. Sidecar exempt from wheel-brake requirement.
- **Wyoming:** Standard. Helmet under 18.

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Children and Sidecars: The Legal Gray Zone

This represents the most complex area of sidecar law. Child restraint laws typically define "motor vehicle" as a passenger car, truck, or van—specifically excluding motorcycles. This creates a legal gap where car seat laws don't apply to sidecars, but child endangerment laws absolutely do.

1

Texas: The Explicit "YES"

Texas Transportation Code § 545.416 clearly states that while operators cannot carry passengers under 5 on motorcycles, children under 5 may ride in sidecars. This implies (but doesn't explicitly require) proper restraint systems.

2

Hawaii: The "NO"

HRS § 291-11 prohibits passengers under 7 unless the motorcycle has three wheels, electric power, a fully enclosed cab, and seat belts. Standard gas-powered sidecars don't qualify.

3

Arkansas: The Hard "NO"

Arkansas Code § 27-20-118 makes it illegal for children under 8 to ride as passengers on motorcycles, with no exemption language for sidecars.

4

Louisiana: The Likely "NO"

LA Rev Stat § 32:191 prohibits carrying children who require car seats (typically under 5). No explicit sidecar exemption exists in the statute.

- **Best Practice for Child Safety:** Install anchor points (D-rings or ISOFIX brackets) directly through the steel frame of the sidecar—never to removable cushions. Use proper 5-point harness systems and ensure DOT-approved helmets for all passengers regardless of age.

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The Helmet Dilemma for Young Children

Finding DOT-approved helmets for toddlers presents the single greatest practical barrier to riding with young children in sidecars. The challenge balances legal requirements against physiological safety.

"DOT standards require specific foam thickness and shell construction to pass impact tests. This makes the smallest approved helmets weigh approximately 2.5 to 3 pounds—the equivalent of putting a 15-pound bowling ball on an adult's neck when scaled to a toddler's proportions."



V-Can V322 (Youth Small)

Fits: 47-48 cm head circumference

Weight: ~2.8 lbs

The smallest full-face DOT helmet available. Widely cited as the only option that fits 3-year-olds snugly.



HJC CL-Y (Youth Small)

Fits: 49-50 cm head circumference

Weight: ~2.6 lbs (1200g)

Premium brand with smaller shell design, but still heavy for toddlers.



MicroDot "Twister"

Fits: Down to XXS

Weight: < 1 lb

Skull cap style—light enough for toddler necks but offers no face protection. Requires goggles.

- Essential Support:** If using a 3lb helmet on children under 5, you must use a neck support collar (such as EVS Sports R4 Youth) to prevent whiplash from helmet weight. The collar transfers weight from the neck to the shoulders.

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Final Recommendations and Resources

Operating a motorcycle with sidecar legally and safely requires understanding complex, often contradictory regulations across jurisdictions. This guide provides a foundation, but responsible riders must verify current laws in their specific state and any states they plan to travel through.



Pre-Ride Checklist

- Verify your Class M license has no 3-wheel restrictions
- Confirm sidecar is declared on insurance policy
- Inspect lighting systems and attachment points
- Ensure passengers have proper DOT helmets
- Check restraint systems are secured to frame



Documentation

- Keep motorcycle registration accessible
- Carry insurance proof showing sidecar coverage
- Document any medical needs for young passengers
- Review state laws before interstate travel



Expert Assistance

For questions about sidecar selection, installation, or compliance with specific state regulations, contact the experts at Cycle Sidecar.

Visit:

www.cyclesidecar.com

Call: 1-623-512-0377

Browse Euro, Rocket, Traveler, and Velorex models designed for safety and style.

Document Information: This guide was compiled by Kevin Mahoney of Cycle Sidecar (www.cyclesidecar.com) and published December 27, 2025. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, laws change frequently and vary by jurisdiction. Always consult your local DMV and legal counsel for definitive guidance. No claim to complete accuracy is made.

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