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Teaching Kids To Ride

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by Sheldon "Two Wheeler" Brown

revised by John Allen

Adult Beginners Balance Brakes Draisines ("no-pedal bikes") Patience Safety Equipment Scooters Stabilisers Running With Child Testimonials Traffic Training Wheels Tricycles Undersized Bike

Teaching Kids To Ride

One of the many tasks parents must undertake is teaching their children to ride bicycles.

At every stage of the learning process, there are several possible approaches, and most parents will be unsure how to proceed. This article will try to cover the options and explain when to choose which.

This article focuses on only the most basic skills: pedaling, steering and balancing, that make it possible for a child to operate a bicycle. There is much more to teach and to learn about cycling than this, but that is mostly beyond the scope of this particular article.

Tricycles

For most children, a tricycle is the first step in learning to ride. The most useful tricycles are the smallest ones, like the one shown in the photo. Ideally, a child should

get a tricycle even before he or she learns to walk. A tricycle has only two things to teach a child: steering and pedaling. The steering usually comes first, because the child can stand on the back step with one foot and push along with the other. Some children will be able to master this even before learning to walk.

Once the basic concept of steering has been learned, the child can start to use the pedals. I believe that tricycles are best suited for indoor use, or use in a level, closed courtyard or driveway.

As soon as the child has become proficient in pedaling and steering a tricycle, it is time to move up to a small bike with training wheels. Most 2 1/2 year-olds are ready for a 12"-wheel bike with training wheels. I would not recommend the purchase of a tricycle for a child that old. As the child gets stronger and more confident on a tricycle, their speed potential can become faster than is safe on a tricycle, especially if they ride on surfaces that are not perfectly flat. A tricycle can run away on even a slight grade. Although a bike on training wheels cannot turn any faster than a tricycle, at least it has a brake!

Conventional upright tricycles become very dangerous as a child gets taller and stronger, particularly if used where there are even slight hills. Once one of these gets moving faster than walking speed, its high center of gravity and lack of brakes makes it a recipe for disaster. It can't stop without brakes, and it can't turn without flipping over.

The other common type of tricycle is the plastic semi-recumbent type, such as the "Big Wheel" (tm). These are not so durable as the older, metal trikes of traditional design, but for an older child, riding on sidewalks and the like, they are considerably safer. Between the low center of gravity and the poor traction of the plastic wheels, they spin out in corners, instead of tipping over. They also usually have a crude brake. Although these are safer for an older child than upright trikes, they only postpone the day when the child will learn to ride a real bike, so a bicycle with training wheels is a better choice.

This type of trike is not as easy to handle for a young child just learning to steer and pedal, due to its awkward steering geometry. They have an extremely shallow head angle, which makes the wheel tend to flop to one side or the other too easily.

Teaching Balance

There are three basic ways to teach a child to balance on two wheels: training wheels, assisted two-wheeling, and un-assisted two wheeling. Each has its advantages, and best results will often be obtained by a mixed approach, adjusted to the child's learning style and the practice area available.

Training Wheels (Stabilisers)

Most bicycles intended for smaller children come with training wheels. That doesn't mean that training wheels are the only way, nor even the best way to teach a child to ride.

Training wheels are potentially the least painful way to learn to ride a bike, but also the slowest. They make the most sense for families who live on very quiet, safe streets without hills. To make good use of training wheels, you need a safe, flat driveway or wide sidewalk or other place where a child can ride with a minimum of supervision. A bike with training wheels can be even more dangerous than a tricycle, because the child is higher up and the base width of the training wheels is fairly narrow. This means that if the bike gets going much faster than a walk, it will topple over if the child tries to turn a corner. Also, if the bike is turning even a little bit, weight is shifted from the rear wheel to the outside training wheel, so the braking power of the rear wheel is greatly reduced.

How To Use Training Wheels

Most people that use training wheels have them adjusted incorrectly. The bike should always have a little bit of lean. If both training wheels can touch the ground at once, there is little weight on the bicycle's rear wheel. This can reduce traction to zero. On uneven ground, the child may get stuck because the wheel spins. Even worse, the brake may become useless. When the bike is new, there should be only a small amount of tilt from one side to the other.

After the child has become accustomed to pedaling, steering and braking, the training wheels should be raised slightly, a bit at a time. It is probably better to do this without telling the child, who may object. The bike will become more and more tippy, and the child will learn to balance automatically with practice. As the child becomes more adept, the bike will spend more and more time with both training wheels off the ground. The day will come when it is obvious that the training wheels are no longer doing anything, and they can be removed.

If the training wheels are left set on their lowest position, the bike is in effect an oversized tricycle, and some kids spend two or three years on training wheels as a result. This is not only a waste of their time, it is really quite dangerous as they learn to ride faster and faster, because of the poor cornering and braking of a training-wheel equipped bike.

Eventually, the child will become heavy enough to bend the training wheel struts upward, making the bike suitably tippy. Then they will finally learn to balance.

If a child has been using training wheels for more than two or three years, it is time to try something else. Putting training wheels on a 20" bike is usually a mistake, unless the child has a specific physical or mental disability.

The training-wheel approach works best for families who live on very quiet streets or have large driveways, or live near parks or other areas where the child may be left pretty much unattended. For most families, this will not be the case, and a parent will need to accompany the child. In this case, the "running-with-the-child" approach makes more sense, since children learn faster this way.

Running With The Child

The traditional way to teach cycling, by running along holding the child up, is still the fastest and best if an undersized bike is not available.

The parent should hold the child by the shoulders and run along behind. **It is important that the parent not hold the handlebars**-the child cannot learn the feel of balancing if the parent is taking control of the bike. If the parent holds onto the saddle or any other part of the bike, the child will not necessarily realize if they are leaning a bit to one side or the other, because the parent will be correcting for them.

Instead, hold the child by the shoulders, so that as they lean to the side, they will feel the side pressure, and can learn to reduce it by turning into the lean. This should be done in a wide flat space, such as an empty parking lot. The parent should not make any attempt to steer the child, just let the bike go where it will.

This is not much fun for the parent, especially if the parent is tall and has to lean over to reach the child's shoulders-sore back time! The parent will also have to be very careful not to bang into the bike or trip over it when the little creep swerves or puts on the brakes unexpectedly, but this approach is the fastest and most parent-involved way to teach basic balancing.

If running along holding the child by the shoulders is too uncomfortable, some parents like to make a handle out of a stick of some sort, typically wedged between the **seat stays** and lashed to the back of the saddle. This doesn't give as good feedback to the child, but it does work. There are also commercial products that amount to the same thing, but I don't generally recommend them. A company called **Wallaby Kids** makes a special vest/handle that serves this purpose, with a handle above the child's shoulder blades. The Web site startstanding.org **recommends using a towel**.

The parent really has to run or at least trot, because balancing a bike at a walking pace is quite an advanced skill. If the bike is moving too slowly, steering corrections will not move the bike sideways fast enough to correct an incipient fall. One correspondent suggested that the parent use roller skates, but I wouldn't suggest this unless you are an unusually good skater.

Each of these three approaches works, and which is best for a particular family will depend on where they live, the type of bike available, and the child's preference. The average kid learns to balance between six and seven, given the chance. It is not unusual for it to happen a couple of years either way. In many cases, a combination of approaches will work best. For instance, using training wheels is very good for teaching the child how to operate a coaster brake, so it is often best to start with the training wheels and then switch to one of the other approaches after the braking has been mastered.

The Undersized Bike Approach

The ideal bike for learning to ride, whether for a child or a deprived adult, is a bike that is "too small" for efficient riding. For learning purposes, the rider should be able to sit on the saddle with both feet flat on the ground and the knees slightly bent. The bike can then be used as a hobby horse or scooter, with the feet always ready to stop a fall. It may even be useful to remove the pedals at first, so that the feet can swing freely. (In case you are new to all this and haven't read the pages about pedals on this site: **the left pedal unscrews clockwise**!) Ideally, a bike for this approach should have at least one handbrake, so that the child can stop while using both feet for balance. A good place to practice is on a grassy field, perhaps with a slight downgrade.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult for parents to justify the expense of a smaller bike that will be outgrown shortly, so there is a constant temptation to buy a bike that is a bit too large on the theory that the child will "grow into" it.

Scooters

A scooter can provide an excellent alternative way to learn balance, and is probably a better alternative to training wheels, especially for a child who has been depending on training wheels too long. A scooter separates the steering/balancing function from the pedaling function, so the child can concentrate on learning to balance without the distraction of pedals.

An additional advantage of a scooter is that it is less scary than a bicycle. One foot is on the ground much of the time, while the other is only a few inches above the ground with no obstruction to a "bail-out".

Any child who can steer a tricycle can operate a scooter at some level of proficiency. To start with, one foot can maintain nearly constant contact with terra firma. As skill is acquired, the pushing foot gradually spends less and less time on the ground, until the basic skill of balancing on two wheels has been mastered.

A "Razor" scooter with its tiny wheels and **spoon brake** can teach balancing, but a scooter with pneumatic tires and handbrakes, like the one shown, is more stable and will accustom a child to the brakes.

A child who has learned balancing very young on a scooter may still find it hard to master starting and stopping on a bicycle. Setting the saddle low can help.

Draisines

("Balance bikes; Run bikes; Push bikes; Learner bikes; No-pedal bikes; pedal-less bike")

There are a number of companies pushing re-invented draisines as an intermediate step between tricycles and bicycles.

These are a waste of time and money. You can achieve the same effect simply by unscrewing the pedals from a real bicycle. (You may have surfed here directly from the top of the page, so, again: **the left pedal unscrews clockwise**!)

Safety Equipment

Encourage kids to start out with proper safety equipment from the get-go. If a child gets used to wearing a helmet on a tricycle, the habit will become well established, and there will not be a later struggle about introducing a helmet. Especially when kids are first learning to ride, gloves and even knee pads can be very worthwhile. A child who falls and gets hurt may get turned off to bicycles at an early age, and at best will take longer to learn, because of fear. Young children love to have their own bicycle gloves, it makes them feel really special. They make a much more useful gift than streamers, bells or baskets.

When my daughter was little, children's cycling gloves were not readily available, and the only gloves I could find to fit her were very high-quality leather gloves that retailed for $30. I felt a bit silly buying them, but I did anyway. The very first time we went for a ride together on the street, she skidded in a patch of sand, and down she went. She got up and got on the bike, and we continued on. When I checked out the gloves later, the leather heel of her right glove was deeply abraded...when I thought what that fall would have done to her little hand, I knew the gloves had already paid for themselves.

Brakes

Most small children's bicycles in the U.S. come with coaster (back-pedaling) brakes. The conventional wisdom is that this is desirable because:

- Children have weak hands, so they can't get a lot of braking power from hand brakes.
- Children are rough on their bicycles, and hand brakes are too fragile to be reliable unless they are carefully maintained.

There is truth to both of these points, but handbrakes have their advantages as well:

- Children who are just learning to balance will often want to put their feet out whenever they fear they are about to fall. On a bicycle with a footbrake, this means that they can't stop. This is a very common cause of crashes among young children.
- Children who have only used a coaster brake can have a difficult time re-learning old habits when they grow into a larger bicycle and have to make the transition to handbrakes. The first time I rode a bike with handbrakes, I got going too fast on a bumpy road, tried to stop by backpedaling, crashed and broke my collarbone.

The ideal solution to this problem is to start out with a bicycle with a coaster brake, but to add a hand brake to it. This is not a major expense, and not very difficult.

It is better for it to be on the front wheel, so that the child will learn good braking techniques, which mainly rely on the use of the front brake. (See also my article on **Braking and Turning** .)

Patience

There is a very wide range of ages at which children master basic balancing, with the average being about 6 years, but normal variation running from 4 to 9. It is important not to push too hard. This can be a real problem for children of active cyclists; excessive pressure can take all the fun out of the experience. A bicycle trailer or cargo tricycle lets you continue with family riding with a very young child. A child who has learned to pedal can ride on the back of a **suitably-equipped tandem** or on a **trailer bike**.The pedaling options make the child a proud, full participant in short family rides, sometimes even before age 3! Allow your child to learn at his or her natural pace, and it is more likely that cycling will become a fun family activity for all of you.

Beginning early with traffic skills

There is much, much to learn about bicycling besides steering, balancing and pedaling. Communication with the child is easy on a tandem; the child can learn when it is safe or unsafe to go, the meaning of traffic signs and signals, etc. The child can make hand signals for you, too. Most children will be eager to do this.

Testimonials:

*Today I accessed your website for assistance with teaching my daughter to ride a bike. We have been trying for several days now, and although she had made fair progress, it just wasn't happening yet. I must mention that she is 10 1/2 years old , and has been putting off learning for all these years because of fear. I read on your website that it is better for the child to ride an **undersized bike** , so I put her on her little brother's bike. I also stopped holding the seat and running along with her. I tried to hold her shoulders but she didn't want me to! Also, we went to a parking lot with a downhill slope. Well...she rides! She learned within 10 minutes. Your advice was exactly what we needed.*

KV, Texas

Harris Cyclery Home Page

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