

Teaching Your Child to Ride a Bicycle



By Bob Oppliger, LCI & Connie Szabo Schmucker, LCI



 Bicycle
Garage
Indy

Introduction

Riding a bike does more than just give children a fun experience—it can serve as a first step toward independence. It also provides exercise, not to mention a great way to go places!

Parents/caregivers can help children, as early as age 3, become confident riders of two-wheeled bicycles. The following pages show how to configure a bike for practice (by removing the pedals and lowering the seat) so the child coasts before learning to pedal. We discuss where to practice, and how to help a child progress through balancing, pedaling, and stopping. Each learning session should last about 30 minutes. Using the strategies and tips that follow, a child can become a successful bicyclist in as little as several days. Some children, however, will need more time. Be patient.

Before beginning bike lessons, make sure your rider has a properly fitted bike helmet: this means correct size and tightness, sitting level on the head, and snugly clipped under the chin. Wearing a properly fitted helmet to prevent head injury cannot be stressed too much. To maintain that protection, be sure to evaluate helmet fit periodically over time to confirm that it still works to keep the rider safe. You'll find a helmet fitting guide at the end of this pamphlet.

Also, particularly for these first lessons, have your rider wear rubber-soled, closed-toe shoes, and not flip-flops. (Closed-toe shoes are always recommended when riding a bike.)

Knowing When to Stop the Session

Look for early signs of frustration and give lots of praise. As new steps are added, sometimes it's two steps forward, one step back. Go back and reinforce what the rider already knows. This helps build their confidence back before moving on. Celebrate small victories and make it fun!! Limit session to 30 minutes at a time (unless progressing really well).

Setting Up the Bicycle

The bike should be the correct frame size or slightly smaller; hand brakes are preferred but coaster brakes (which brake by pedaling backward) are an option.

To begin, take off the pedals so they are out of the way. Pedals screw off by twisting in the opposite direction from how they're pushed while biking. So, the left pedal screws off clockwise and the right pedal counterclockwise. A generous squirt of lubricant helps twisting them off.

If pedals can't be removed, put some padding (a sock or foam drink cozy) to help cushion the pedal. It is a milestone when the pedals are added back on the bike.

Lower the seat so the rider's feet are flat on the ground when the rider is seated, as shown in the image. This image also shows the pedals removed. With the pedals out of the way, the rider can use feet flat on the ground to push off.



Location for Bike Riding Lessons

Give your budding rider plenty of room. Look for a large, paved surface—for example, a quiet parking lot, school playground, or basketball court, with slight downhill slope if possible. However, in the absence of an open area, a flat or slightly sloped sidewalk is suitable for these all-important initial steps.

Braking with a Hand Brake

Child-size bikes are configured with hand brakes or coaster brakes. (Having a hand brake is preferred to be able to separate braking from pedaling.) Youth bikes with 20"-wheel size and above generally will have at least one hand brake. The hand brake is typically only on the right hand and brakes only the rear wheel. (If there is a left-hand brake, it stops the front wheel and can be ignored until riding is mastered.)

Have your child walk with the bike, both hands on the handlebars, body closer to the handlebars than the seat and test the brake to see how it works. Walk 40' or 50' and say "Brake" and the rider should use the right brake to stop the bike. Do this a couple of times. If there's a left-hand brake, do not use it alone; it may cause the bike to "buck" and throw the rider off the bike. The left-hand brake is not essential until biking is mastered and offers only modest help.

If the bike has coaster brakes, we will discuss below how to brake.

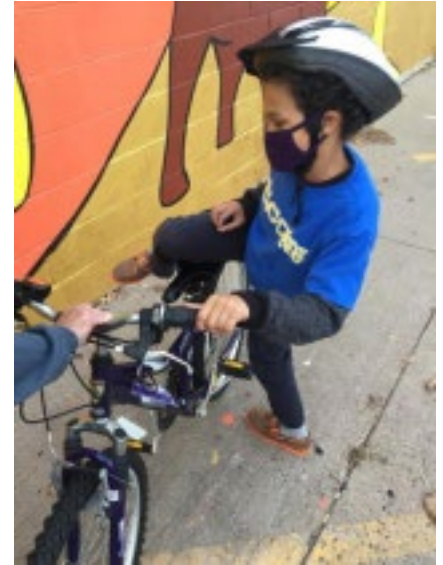
Getting on the Bike

To get on the bike (with the bike between the rider's legs): Stand close to the handlebars, both hands on the handlebars, with the hand brake on, if there is one, so the bike does not roll.

Swing the leg that is closest to the bike over the back of the seat and rear tire and stand in front of the seat. If needed, an adult hand at the center of the handlebar can stabilize the bike on the first couple of tries.

To get off the bike, make sure the bike is stable and stand in front of the seat.

With the hand brake on, swing one leg over the seat and rear wheel so that the rider ends up with both legs on one side of the bike. Again, an adult hand at the center of the handlebar can stabilize the bike on the first couple of tries. See illustration.



Balancing and Coasting

Begin with the rider seated on the bike, with feet flat on the ground. Before pushing off, your young rider should be looking up and ahead, and the bike should aim straight ahead as well, with the front wheel in alignment with the rest of the bike.

The rider should push off with both feet at the same time. The goal is to see how far the rider can coast. At first, this may be only a few feet. To stop, the rider should brake first and then put his or her feet down. If the bike does not have hand brakes, the rider should stop by dragging

their feet. Remind the rider that the seat is low so the rider can catch themselves with their feet and keep from falling.

If pushing off with both feet is difficult, try the technique of walking the bike to get momentum. Gaining confidence may take several days—or sometimes weeks—and can depend on the rider's age and motor skill level. Be patient. Once again, to stop, the rider can drag their feet.



Longer Coasts

Work toward longer coasts. Give praise for small successes along the way—say, coasting three feet, then coasting five feet, and so on. Keep encouraging each longer coast—10 feet, 20 feet, and longer. With those longer coasts, challenge the rider to steer (navigate) around small obstacles and turn corners. To stop, encourage the rider to squeeze the hand brake gently and then put their feet down after the bike has come to a stop. Dragging the feet is still a good option.

Restoring the Pedals

Once the rider has become comfortable with coasting about 30 feet, it's time to restore the pedals. Although both pedals can be added, initially, it's recommended to start by installing the pedal only for the dominant foot. Now have the rider practice coasting with one foot resting on the pedal at 6 O'clock. Try braking to stop. A guiding hand on the back of the seat may be helpful here.

Now, place that pedal in a position so it lines up even with the downtube on the bike as shown in the illustration at right (2 O'clock for right pedal, or 10 O'clock for left pedal). To start, have the rider push down with the pedal foot and push off with opposite foot. The pedal foot should rest at about 6 O'clock.



Again, try using the brake to slow and stop.

Once the rider has mastered coasting with one pedal, add the second pedal, repeat the start and coast as before, but rest the opposite foot on the 2nd pedal which should be at 1-2 O'clock. Encourage the rider to find foot placement without looking down. (A guiding hand on the back of the seat may be helpful.) Use the hand braking as above and put their foot down to stop. This same process can be accomplished with both pedals added at once, but it requires the rider to think about several new tasks at same time.

After the rider gets comfortable resting their feet on the pedals, invite them to pedal. A guiding hand on the back of the seat may be helpful here, too. It won't take long to master this

step. Encourage the rider to continuously pedal and rest with their feet at 1-2 O'clock & 7-8 O'clock and not in a vertical position, i.e., 6 O'clock & 12 O'clock positions because it's difficult to gain forward motion from the 12 O'clock position. (Remember, pedaling backwards from a vertical position with coaster brakes creates the stopping motion.)

If there are coaster brakes, introduce the idea of pedaling "backwards" while putting their foot down to stop. The forward pushing pedal can be referred to as the "go" pedal and the backward pushing pedal as the "stop" pedal. (This may take a couple tries, so dragging feet still works.)

Stopping

Stopping has four steps:

- Stop pedaling,
- Place starting foot (from above) with the pedal straight down,
- After the bike slows down a bit, apply the right-hand brake,
- Once the bike has stopped, the rider should be getting ready to step the non-starting foot off the pedal and forward onto the ground in front of the pedal.
- **-Note:** If the bike has coaster brakes, coast with non-starting foot in down position

Once the rider has learned starting/pedaling and stopping, he or she also needs to learn how to start on flat surfaces and on uphill surfaces. (Remember, these first practice runs have involved starting on a slight downhill slope to gain more momentum when the rider starts out.)

Once the rider has learned starting, pedaling, and stopping, the next step involves **lots** of practice to make starting/stopping second nature. With the seat still low, the rider always can put one or both feet down to maintain balance and brake. Once the rider starts pedaling, he or she may not want to practice stopping, so make sure the rider masters braking.

Turning

Practice turning in a quiet parking lot or playground.

Once the rider has gained more speed, he or she will need to slow down prior to making turns, coast through the turns, and then pedal out of the turns (a new concept for riders who have just learned how to ride).

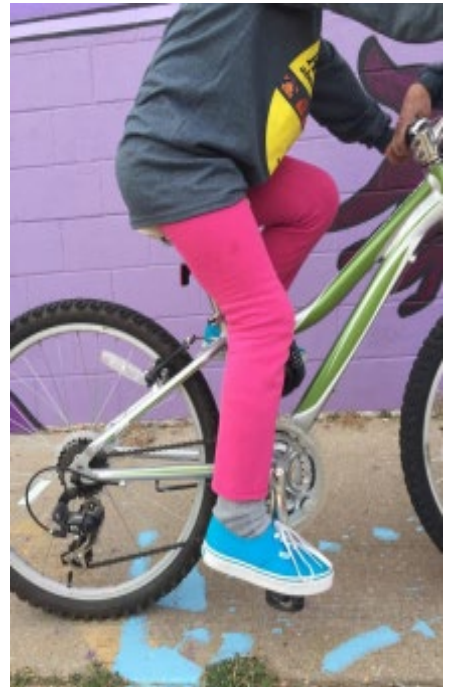
Experienced bicyclists turn by leaning more than by turning the handlebars. As a lead-up to full turn, use small obstacles (such as cones or other safe objects) to create a slalom course, and then introduce this leaning concept. The faster the speed, the wider the turn. Practice riding in a parking lot doing all left turns, and then practice doing all right turns.

Raising the Seat

Once the rider has become more comfortable with riding and braking, it's time to start to move the seat to proper height. When the seat is adjusted properly, the seated rider's leg has a slight bend when the pedal is in the lowest position (see illustration).

Gradually raise the seat in three or four stages. This allows the rider to use the dragging-feet option to stop until the correct seat height is reached.

Practice starting when off the seat, rather than in a seated position. This is easier—it uses body weight to push the pedal, allows greater leg extension for more power in pedal strokes, and the rider experiences less wobbly pedaling, because the legs don't have to bend as much in the pedal stroke.



Stopping/ Starting

Not every start will be on a slight downhill slope. Once the rider has learned starting and stopping, the rider will need to learn these skills on flat surfaces and uphill slopes. Practice getting ready to start again after stopping at an intersection, stop sign, or stop light and with slight inclines.

The Authors

Bob Oppliger has been a bike commuter and tour cyclist for almost 40 years. For over a decade, he has been a League of American Bicyclists League Cycling Instructor (LCI) and the Education and Advocacy Coordinator for the Bicyclists of Iowa City. He is a member of the League of American Bicyclists Board of Directors.

Connie Szabo Schmucker is a League of American Bicyclists League Cycling Instructor (LCI). As Advocacy Director for Bicycle Garage Indy/ BGI Fitness, Indianapolis, IN, she works on programs and projects to get more people on bikes. Connie became a bike advocate 20+ years ago to help others experience the joy of bicycling.

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Bike and Multi-Sport Helmets: Quick Fit Check

Proper Helmet Fit

Use this easy, 3-point check to test for a proper helmet fit.



The "Eyes, Ears, Mouth Test" is courtesy of the Bicycle Coalition of Maine.

1. Eyes

Helmet sits level on your child's head and rests low on the forehead, 1 to 2 finger widths above the eyebrows. A helmet pushed up too high will not protect the face or head well in a fall or crash.

2. Ears

The straps are even, form a “Y” under each earlobe, and lay flat against the head.

3. Mouth

The buckled chin strap is loose enough so that your child can breathe. There should be enough room so you can insert a finger between the buckle and chin. It should be tight enough that if your child opens their mouth, you can see the helmet pull down on top.

Why are helmets needed?

Helmets provide the best protection against head and brain injury, whether your child is riding a bike, scooter, or skateboard, or using skates. However, a helmet will only protect when it fits well. Help your child get in the habit of wearing a helmet by starting when they're young. Be a good role model and wear a helmet yourself.

How do I choose a helmet?

- Choose a helmet that meets safety standards. For biking, riding a scooter, recreational roller skating and in-line skating, look for a helmet with a CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission) or Snell sticker inside.
- For skateboarding, or aggressive, trick, or extreme skating, look for a helmet that has a sticker inside saying it meets ASTM F1492. It is not enough for the helmet just to look like a skate helmet.
- There are some helmets that meet both the CPSC and ASTM F1492 standards. They are multi-sport helmets and can be used for biking, skating, riding a scooter and skateboarding. Don't be

fooled into thinking that helmets that look “skate-style” are always multi-sport. Look for the two safety standard labels to be sure they are dual-certified.

- Helmet costs vary. Expensive helmets are not always better. Choose one that fits properly, and that your child likes and will wear.
- Helmet sizes vary between manufacturers. Always test for proper fit.
- Check used or hand-me-down helmets with care, and never wear a helmet that is cracked or broken. Used helmets may have cracks you cannot see. Older helmets may not meet current safety standards.

What are the pads for?

Helmets come with fit pads to help ensure a proper fit. Use the pads where there is space at the front, back and/or sides of the helmet to get a snug fit. Move pads around to touch your child’s head evenly all the way around. Replace thick pads with thinner ones as your child grows.

How do I check the fit?

If you can move the helmet from side to side, add thicker pads on the sides or adjust the universal fit ring on the back if the helmet has one.

When done, the helmet should feel level, fit solidly on your child’s head and be comfortable. If it doesn’t fit, keep working with the fit pads and straps or try another helmet.

Safety Tips

- Teach your child to take their helmet off before playing at the playground or climbing on equipment or trees. The straps can

get caught on poles or branches and prevent your child from breathing.

- Leave hair loose or tie it back at the base of the neck.
- For skiing or snowboarding, you will need another type of helmet.

When does a helmet need to be replaced?

- Bike helmets are good for only 1 crash. Replace the helmet after a crash, and when the manufacturer suggests.
- Follow the instructions from the manufacturer to know when to replace your multi-impact helmet.
- Replace the helmet if it does not have a CPSC, Snell or ASTM sticker inside, it no longer fits, or your child doesn't like it.

From Seattle Children's Hospital