



Look Mom and Dad, No Training Wheels! Teaching Kids to Love Riding Their Bikes

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One of the most memorable parts of childhood is learning to ride a bike. This can be a wonderful, natural experience that empowers children and creates an opportunity to share a great activity with family and friends. As parents, we want our kids to enjoy riding, ride with confidence and safety, and have a desire to ride. Our goal is to help the child learn and to experience success. They have to learn this for themselves; our role is to create the right conditions for them. Only then will they experience any of the romance associated with learning a new skill or sport. This article describes a way of safely introducing riding to even very young children in a manner that is empowering, family friendly, and encourages their natural skill development.

This approach described here:

- Empowers the child to explore riding a bicycle using their own capabilities
- Fosters enthusiasm, confidence, and enjoyment of riding with family and independently
- Allows the child to explore riding in ways that are comfortable
- Creates a natural, smooth development path free of imposed limitations
- Improves rider safety
- Is suitable for children as young as 18 months old
- Dramatically speeds the rider's development
- Develops balance and coordination
- Assures an easy, natural transition to riding a pedal bike without training wheels

Kids have great balance and are good at developing it. Dynamic balance is often new for 2-3 year olds but develops naturally with practice. As a father and a coach I've taken to watching kids learning to ride and searched for an answer that made sense from the standpoint of finding an easy, natural, enjoyable and safe method that supports the development of essential riding skills. The first thing I wanted to do was to eliminate training wheels from the experience.

Training Wheels:

- Remove the need and ability to learn proper balance
- Teach riders to keep their feet on the pedals rather than find the safety of the ground when stopping
- Make a bike highly prone to tip-over accidents to the forward/side direction (an inherent weakness of tricycles also). This is great risk when braking while turning.



Aspen (2) on her Strider™ Running Bike
For information about Strider™ bikes,
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- Leave their rider stuck anytime the rear wheel is held above the ground by the training wheels.
- Create an awkward fall from further above the ground, increasing the risk of discouragement and injury.
- Prevent the natural development of the basic skills required for cycling.
- Force children to ride without actively balancing. Children naturally learn how to balance and to take this away does not prepare them for riding bicycles.

The sensible alternative is the walking bike. Built like a small, regular bike that lacks pedals, these are riding toys that the child sits on just like a regular bike but walks with his or her feet. The beauty is what happens after the child starts to walk with the bike. Within days children become more comfortable and start to explore the natural roll of the wheels by making longer strides. Strides turn to push and glide actions which give way to riding increasing distances between pushes or ground touches. The entire time the child is on the bike, they are learning to steer, lean, balance, and put their feet to the ground to stop. The rate of development can be amazing and the child is empowered to explore at their own pace. Because they always have immediate access to the ground with their feet, and they naturally learn to control speed, balance and steer, their progression is natural and intuitive. This solves all of the problems I see with training wheels. Riders develop at their own pace through self-discovery.

When I became aware of walking bikes, it was an idea out of Europe and I found only one option. Boy was I glad to find it! Today, the options are more varied and the bikes have become more affordable. A good walking bike should:

- Be small enough for the rider to comfortably stride while on the seat
- Roll smoothly and well
- Minimize exposure to wire spokes and places to catch small fingers, feet, or clothing
- Be somewhat harder to steer than an adult bike to facilitate control and reduce oversteering of the front wheel.

When teaching people to ride (or ski, skate, drive, walk a balance beam, run, ...), teach them to look ahead in the direction they want to go. Vision is key to balance and awareness. Teach your rider to look ahead, never down at the handlebars or wheel. When looking down our balance is pretty poor. If they look where they are going, their balance will be solid and they will be able to respond to obstacles, other riders, or changes in terrain.

Turning skills develop pretty naturally but it takes time to learn how much to steer and lean with changes in speed or slope. With a walking bike steering, leaning, and balance all come together to execute a turn, just like a regular bike. Bikes with training wheels require turning of the handlebars only and are unstable in a turn. The rider must learn to lean, balance, and control the turn all as new skills when the training wheels are removed.

Braking with a walking bike is natural, just use your feet. Kids know how to do this. Moreover, they put their foot down whenever they need a little comfort or assistance. Contrast this to a bike with training wheels and the rider must isolate the braking activity. If the rider turns or leans while braking, they will fall over. Children who are accustomed to



Having a goal aids the new rider with exploring bike control

training wheels stop with their feet still on the pedals and are reluctant to remove their feet from the pedals. If they are more likely to fall over, their falls are worse because they didn't use their foot to connect safely with the ground as they lost balance and they are ill prepared for the transition to riding a traditional bicycle.

Share your enthusiasm and celebrate their wins. It is amazing to see kids develop their cycling abilities and when their parents and caregivers tell them that they are doing well, they feel great. It makes riding more fun and we all tend to like things better that we feel we are good at.

Helmets - Nothing is more vital than protecting your child from avoidable head injuries. I recommend that the child wears a properly fitted, comfortable (ventilated) helmet anytime they are outdoors on a riding toy with you. Enjoy suiting up and see the helmet as a natural part of the activity. If you are unsure of how to adjust the helmet, visit a local bike shop for help. I also suggest fingerless gloves as the hand protection can make small spills minor events.

Have a child riding well with training wheels? – You can apply the same approach to help them free themselves of their training wheels. Remove the training wheels and the pedals. Tie the cranks to the bike frame so they don't spin. Lower the seat so the rider can easily reach the ground with both feet while sitting on the saddle with bent knees. Now the child can use the same kick-and-glide techniques to ride their bike and develop their balance and handling skills. They will quickly be ready to put the pedals back on and begin riding on their own.

Share the sport. Encourage your kids to ride with other kids who are also learning. Cycling etiquette says it is acceptable to require riding partners to wear helmets if you require them for yourself and your kids.

Ride with them and make riding a part of what and how they experience other things. While it is great to ride a bike, it is inspiring to ride a bike as a part of another experience. Think of your rides...What is more fun? To ride and practice drills at the park or to experience skills during a longer ride that could be on new terrain or a trip to the store. When you ride with your child, you create the best opportunity to teach them to be safe and aware when riding and to teach them how to share bike paths and roads safely. The bike opens doors and as your child learns to ride, explore new ways of doing things with them. Go to the store, to a new park that is a little farther than the one you normally go to, visit a friend, whatever. Make the bike ride a way of accomplishing another goal or task. It won't be fast but it is great fun and as always in cycling, the journey is more important than the destination. Make it a shared adventure!

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Roger Rintala (RogerRintala@wenzelcoaching.com) has been a sports coach for over 20 years working with children and adults in cycling, skiing, and baseball. Together with his wife Dawn and their two children, the family enjoys many cycling adventures together. Ryan, now 4, began riding a traditional bicycle to pre-school and beyond when he was 2 years, nine months old. Aspen, now 2 ½ years, is learning to ride her pink Strider and is creative in her explorations. Roger shared his love of skiing as a PSIA Level 2 certified ski instructor at Alpine Meadows for 6 years and has been a cycling coach with Wenzel Coaching since 2001.