

Teach your child to ride

There are a number of ways to learn to ride. One of them – you may remember yourself – involves stabilisers on a little bike, stabilisers being removed, and Dad running along behind you holding the saddle, then letting go... only for you to panic, wobble, and crash into a hawthorn hedge. It does work – eventually. Plenty of us riding around today are the proof. There are ways that are easier, quicker, and less painful.

First off, don't put your faith in stabilisers. They don't help. They don't do any harm, they just turn the bicycle into a sort of tricycle, which your son or daughter might quite enjoy pedalling around. But your child won't actually begin to learn how to cycle until the stabilisers are removed. That's because the key component of cycling is balancing, which you can't learn if something – or someone – is holding you up.

A proper bike

Children develop differently so it's impossible to give an exact age when they're ready for a proper bicycle. However, children can usually learn to ride a two-wheeler at the age of three. Almost all are capable of learning to ride by five or six. This can't be stressed enough: it's much easier and much quicker if they've got experience of balancing and steering already, either from a scooter or learner bike.

In fact, you can go through 90 percent of the 'teaching to ride' drill using only a learner bike. If you will be using a normal bicycle, the first step, apart from discarding any stabilisers, is to turn the bicycle into a learner bike. Remove the pedals – not forgetting that the left-hand pedal unscrews clockwise – and wrap electrical insulation tape around the crank ends to cover up any sharp burrs and provide a bit of padding in case it connects with a leg or ankle.

Next, lower the saddle so that your child can put both feet flat on the floor. (If that's not possible, and if your child can't easily straddle the top tube with feet on the floor, then the bike is too big.) You now have a learner bike.

Dress your child in such a way that grazes are unlikely in the event of a fall. Learning to ride a bike doesn't necessarily involve falling off. However, it can happen. Falls that hurt can magnify the fear of 'leaping into the dark' that learning to balance represents. So to prevent scrapes, it's better if your child wears a long-sleeve top and long trousers – fastened back at the ankle with an elastic band if they could catch on anything. While not essential, a helmet and child-sized cycling mitts can be also useful to prevent scrapes to the head or hands.

Remind your child how the bicycle's steering works – that if you point the handlebars that way, you go that way. Show your child how to work at least the front brake. It's more powerful than the rear and requires less hand strength to operate. Moreover, the right is usually the dominant hand. Get your child to demonstrate using the brake, so that you can be secure in the knowledge that he or she can reach and use the lever. Normally it's a bad idea to depend on the front brake alone; at walking pace, it doesn't really matter. If your child is on a learner bike without a brake, stopping means using shoe leather. In this case, it's important for stability that your child puts both feet down to stop. Again, spell this out.

Time to ride

Now find a gentle slope. Tarmac footpaths away from through-traffic are good, as are empty driveways, as you don't get the bumps between slabs like you do with paved paths. Avoid parked cars: a shouting neighbour whose car has just been hit will distress your child. Grass hurts less if your child falls, but an uneven surface makes a fall more likely.

Set junior astride the bike and walk 5 - 10 metres down the gentle slope. Ask your child to push off and steer towards you. To begin with, this may mean them scooting all the way towards you, feet alternately on the floor. That's fine. As your child's confidence grows, encourage coasting – keeping the feet in the air for longer periods between dabs.

It can go wrong at the coasting stage. Your child may look at the floor or off to one side. This will result in a wobble and maybe a fall. On a bike, you go where you look. That's why you're standing in front and not behind: you're the target. If you're behind, your child may panic, look around, and crash. Stay in front and repeat the phrase: 'Look at me!' If your child is looking at you, he or she will instinctively steer towards you. And if anything does start to go wrong, you can take a few steps forward and grab the handlebars to prevent a fall.

Once your child can coast for a short distance, encourage him or her to coast for longer – which may mean pushing off, then coasting, then pushing off again if the slope's gradient doesn't provide enough momentum. So that you're not too far away, it can help if you walk or trot backwards a few metres in front of your child, again repeating the mantra 'Look at me.' (Don't forget to glance backwards so that you don't fall over!)

If two adults are available, one can walk behind – silently and not holding bike or child – while the other stays still further away, calling out 'look at me'. The advantage of this is solely for the adults involved: it means no one has to trot backwards.

Encourage your child to slow down and stop using the brake(s) before putting the feet down. But be ready to step in and offer support in the event of any absent-mindedness. Above all, be sure to let your child know how well he or she is doing. Cycling is not innate: it's a tricky skill to learn, and while we never forget it, we do forget how hard it seemed when we were small. If there's any frustration, tiredness or tears, then simply stop. There's always tomorrow. It might be that your child will learn in under an hour, or it might take several hours spread over several days.

Refit the pedals

Sooner or later, your child will master the art of coasting. He or she will be able to push around, steer, brake, and freewheel for as long as the momentum lasts. With the magic skill of balancing a bicycle already in the bag, your child is almost done.

To turn this into cycling, you just need to refit the pedals. Leave the saddle where it is for now, nice and low. Adults and older children won't want the saddle set this low, but for small children it's very important that they can still get both feet down on the floor easily.

Go back to your gentle slope and repeat the ride-towards-you sessions, only instead of coasting this time encourage your child to lift the feet, put them on the pedals and pedal. Again, you may find your child looks down. Repeat the mantra: 'Look at me.' It's better for your child to coast under control, initially unable to find the pedals, than to look down and pedal into a hedge. Pedalling does affect the steering of a bicycle, so to begin with just practise getting the feet on the pedals and coasting. Then you can introduce pedalling.

As your child's confidence grows, get them to pedal along on the flat – towards you as you trot backwards. Repeat as necessary. Once this has fully sunk in, you can let your child ride without you as a target. Stay nearby, though. Don't just tell your child 'Remember to look where you're going'. That means essentially nothing to a four-year-old. Spell it out: 'On a bicycle, you go where you look. So look where you want to go'. Kids are smart and catch on quickly.

Next steps

Once they have got the basics children can take advantage of Bikeability, the national standard cycle training programme, which takes them from basic bike handling skills in an off-road setting, through to acquiring the confidence and competence to ride safely on the road. Find out about Bikeability at <http://www.bikeability.org.uk/>, including information on how to find a training provider in your area.