

The Importance of learning to ride a bicycle

1. How important is learning to balance and ride a bicycle for children with disabilities?

Personally I believe it is hugely important – probably the third most important physical skill usually learned in childhood. In importance it probably comes only after walking and running.

2. Why is learning to ride a bicycle so important that parents and therapists should consider devoting considerable effort to helping the child to learn the skill wherever the child probably has the required potential?

The reasons are given below. For the child biking gives:-

- a. excellent exercise
- b. improvement in sense of balance
- c. a very useful and environmentally friendly way of getting about which can be used throughout or at any time in the child's future life for pleasure or for journeys for work or shopping. In some cases the affects of the disability mean that they will later not be allowed, or be unable to learn to drive a car. In those cases apart from public transport, it may be the best way for them to go around independently. My own son Jeremy is an example. Because hemiplegia affects his lateral vision so much he is not allowed to learn to drive but can and does bike to work, for pleasure and for exercise.
- d. a huge boost in both morale and 'street cred' when that child has learned to ride with and like his or her brothers, sisters, or friends. In Jeremy's and many other childrens' cases it is very hard to overstate how important that boost is. It is much more important than I suspect many parents and therapists realise. In Jeremy's case on the first day that he managed to ride an unstabilised bike he (and I) were both absolutely delighted. That day he rode for hours with his brothers with a kind of enraptured joy written all over his face. These kind of successes also help children to believe in their own ability to overcome many of their problems provided they try long and hard enough.
- e. avoidance of embarrassment or jeering that might otherwise be problems if the child still cannot ride a bicycle when they get a little older. Some such children therefore refuse to ride tricycles, which are in any case much more expensive for parents and organisations.

1. Which is the best age for learning?

We believe that this is as young as is reasonably possible. Using our first ever set of balance training stabilisers my son finally succeeded in riding an unstabilised bicycle when he was nearly 8. The next two children to try to learn by the balance training method also had disabilities and were of similar age. Both were successful.

2. How can balance training stabilisers help?

The rider practices first for several sessions with the stabiliser wheels in the outer positions. As confidence and skill increase these wheels are moved inwards, closer and closer to the rear wheel of the bicycle. With practice sessions in each wheel position this is a much easier and very well proven way to gradually improve bicycle balancing until hopefully riders can manage without stabilisers.

Between the three different sizes of stabilisers riders from young children to adults can all be helped. The 2 larger sizes can be fitted onto most geared bicycles.

3. Other common problems

Sometimes feet may slip off the pedals. Toe clips may be a sufficient answer otherwise a therapist may be able to arrange attachment of plates and foot straps to pedals. If the child has a weaker hand which cannot brake strongly enough at least ensure that the stronger hand brakes the rear wheel. Better still ask a cycle shop to install a fitting allowing both brakes to be operated by the stronger hand.

4. Equipment Sources

a. Balance Training Bicycle Stabilisers: available by mail order from

Good Designs, 60 Gwel Eryri, Llandegfan, Menai Bridge, Anglesey. LL59 5RD.
Tel. (01248) 713624

b. Toe clips: available from most bike shops.

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