

How Parents Can Help their Children Be Safe and Responsible on a Bicycle

Bicycling is fun and a big step in growing up. Having their own transportation gives them mobility and a taste of independence. But, without proper training, kids can get into serious trouble on a bicycle. This bulletin will help you teach your child the attitudes and skills that will help make him or her a safer rider now and for years to come.

There is no magic age at which a child can safely ride a bike. Younger children should ride under direct adult supervision, even when on sidewalks. Sidewalks have hazards, too. Motorists entering and leaving driveways may not look for bikes, so bicyclists must look for and stop for cars crossing sidewalks. It can be said that before the age of ten, few children can really understand traffic. They can be taught certain specific skills, but they will have trouble judging vehicle speeds and understanding concepts like "right-of-way."

Help them to understand that a bicycle is a vehicle and not a toy. Teach them what to look for like loose chains and nuts, broken spokes, and how to start and stop a bicycle. Spend time with your children. Show them that you care about their bicycling habits. Take them out for training rides. Here are some suggestions on what you can do:

Proper Equipment

Be sure your child rides a bike that fits, one which he or she can straddle with both feet flat on the ground. A larger bike to "grow into" is hard for them to control. Stick with a bike having a coaster brake (the kind that brakes when you pedal backwards), unless your child's hands are large and strong enough to operate handbrake levers.

Your child must wear a helmet. Children under the age of 18 are required by California State Law to wear a helmet. Bicycle accidents are a major cause of head injuries in children. Hardshell bicycle helmets save lives. Three out of four bicyclists killed in crashes die of head injuries, and thousands suffer permanent brain damage. Most of these deaths and serious injuries could be prevented by hardshell helmet use. Helmets are stylish and come in all sizes. Most bike shops can fit your child (and you, to set a good example) with a comfortable helmet. Purchase a helmet that meets Snell Memorial Foundation or American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standards. Forget the others. Also be aware that children riding in trailers or bicycle carriers must also wear an approved and properly fitted helmet.

Sidewalks, Driveways, etc.

Stop before entering a street from a sidewalk, driveway, parking lot, alley, curb, or anyplace. About half of the children eight years old or younger who get killed on bikes get hit when they ride out of a driveway without stopping or looking when they enter a road. Here's what you can do: Explain the reason for stopping before entering a street. Take your child to the driveway and practice stopping, moving out to see around objects, scanning left-right-left, and if there's no traffic, proceed into the road.

No Playing in the Road

Do not allow your child to play in the road. What you can do: Help your child identify other places such as parks or playgrounds where he or she can ride figure eights, and otherwise zoom around without having to worry about cars. Explain that the street is for safe riding practices only.

Ride Your Bicycle With the Flow of Traffic

Bicycling on the left side of the street, against traffic, is one of the most dangerous violations a bicyclist can make. Yet, most people who ride that way actually believe they are safer facing traffic. These people have bought into the myth that their greatest danger is being struck from behind by a motorist. Some people who ride against traffic will tell you that they were taught as children to ride that way. Others do it because they don't want to take the time to cross the street. Here are some facts to keep in mind:

- Approximately 1/3 of all car bike crashes involve wrong way cyclists.
- Nearly all car-bike crashes occur at intersections and involve turning or crossing motorists. By riding against traffic, the cyclist is approaching every intersection and driveway from an unexpected location. In doing so, they are outside of the motorist's normal searching pattern. The cyclist is essentially invisible.

- About 90% of car-bike collisions are caused by conditions or actions in front of the cyclist. Only 4%-6% of all car-bike crashes involve a motorist striking a non-swerving cyclist from behind. These crashes rarely occur in the daytime. They occur most often at night when the cyclist is insufficiently illuminated or the motorist is intoxicated.
- Stop signs and other traffic control devices are posted for traffic traveling on the right side of the street. By riding against traffic, cyclists may not see important regulatory signs which apply to them.
- Cyclists riding against traffic endanger other bicyclists as well. Since there are no rules on how oncoming cyclists should pass one another, the threat of head-on collisions between cyclists is very real. Approaching speeds at the time of the collision can reach over 40 mph.
- Riding on the right side of the roadway is the law in all fifty states!
- Despite what people say, they are *never* safer riding against traffic.

Sometimes we unknowingly teach children to ride on the wrong side of the street. Consider the situation where a parent is walking on the left-hand side of the roadway, accompanied by a young child just learning to bicycle. This child's first experiences of bicycling on the roadway wrongly teach her/him that the left side is correct. Or, how about the child, who wants to go just a short way down the street to a friend's house, and in order to travel on the right-hand side, it would require crossing the street twice? The parent tells the child not to cross the street, and to ride on the left because it's only a short distance.

There is no blanket solution to the wide range of situations adults experience with children in traffic. There may be times when a bicycle is not an option, and the child must walk, such as crossing the street. Remember, though, that actions speak louder than words and significantly influence a child's behavior.

Stop Signs and Signals

Stop at all stop signs and red lights. Bicyclists breaking this basic rule cause about 30% of serious bike/car crashes for cyclists 18 years old or younger. What you can do: Explain the reasons for traffic signs and signals, and that traffic works as well as it does because most people know and follow the rules. Practice identifying different traffic signs. Close your eyes and listen for approaching "quiet" cars. Practice stopping and looking before entering an intersection and waiting for others who may not have yielded the right-of-way.

Traffic

Watch out for traffic and be predictable when travelling in traffic. Cyclists who make unexpected left turns without scanning behind for traffic and signaling their turns account for 30% of serious car/bike mishaps for young children. The key here is to look to the rear to see cars coming from behind. Children often forget about cars they can't see, think cars can stop faster than they really can, or assume adults will "look out for them." Bicyclists travelling around parked cars should also scan behind and yield to overtaking traffic. What you can do: Teach your child to walk across busy streets until he or she has more experience and understands traffic. In the meantime, for residential street riding, your child can learn to always scan and signal before left turns. To teach scanning behind without swerving, take your child to a playground to practice riding a straight painted line while quickly looking behind. Stand alongside and hold up two or three fingers after your child rides by. Without swerving, have him or her practice telling you how many fingers you are holding up.

Decisions

Make your own decisions. Many accidents happen when youngsters follow each other. The first may run a stop sign and get through, but others may not be as lucky. What you can do: Impress upon your child the importance of checking traffic for him or herself. Each cyclist in a group should stop for stop signs, and scan behind (and yield to overtaking and oncoming traffic) before making left turns.

Busy Streets

No riding on busy streets. Children haven't built up their traffic cycling skills to handle heavy traffic situations. What you can do: Let your child know that certain streets are "off-limits" and that riding on them is a privilege that will come when it is earned.

Night Riding

No night riding. Older cyclists, with the proper equipment and cycling skills, can do it in reasonable safety, but it's 20 times riskier than day riding, and it's not for kids. What you can do: Rule out night riding entirely. If your child is stuck somewhere after dark, be sure he or she knows to call you, collect from a pay phone if necessary, for a ride home.