

BICYCLE SAFETY

What Every Parent Should Know

Bicycling is fun, it helps us keep fit, and it gives us mobility. For kids, the bicycle is their first vehicle, a source of pride — and an important way to get around. In addition, bicycling is generally a safe activity. But, when bicyclists make basic mistakes, they're the ones most likely to get hurt.

For this reason, the attitudes you instill in your child *now* will determine how he or she will ride for years to come. If your child gets a good grounding in safe riding techniques, he or she will be able to enjoy the benefits of bicycling for many years.

Massachusetts Safe Routes to School, a program of MassRIDES, is a service of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, and supported by the Federal Highway Administration.



Active
Living RESOURCE
CENTER



BY AND LARGE...

...bicycling is a safe activity. But, like many activities, one has to learn a few things before safely taking part. This brochure points out common problems kids have while bicycling and suggests some solutions. But just reading it, or having your child read it, isn't enough. You and your child should go over the topics and do the exercises suggested. If possible, you should ride with your child. This will be valuable for both of you. And fun, too!

HOW OLD IS OLD ENOUGH?

Before the age of 10, few kids understand how traffic works. Children have trouble judging speed and distance. They can't locate sounds — like a car's engine or a siren — very well. They think that, if they can see a car, the driver can see them. They can certainly be taught skills and rules, but may have trouble with confusing traffic situations.

Are you an experienced cyclist? Take your child out for training rides. This can work with young kids. If you aren't a skilled cyclist, lay down iron-clad rules and help your child learn specific lessons. First, the rules:

1. No playing in the road.
2. No riding on busy streets.
3. No riding at night.
4. Stop for all stop signs.
5. Ride on the right, with traffic.
6. Make your own decisions.
7. Always wear your bike helmet.

Next, let's look at four common bicycling myths in the next column...

A MAJOR DANGER!

Many drivers cut through neighborhoods to avoid busy main streets. They often go faster than the 25 mph speed limit and may even be talking on a phone. *These people aren't paying attention and can kill your child.* For help fighting fast traffic in your neighborhood, contact your city's traffic engineer.



FOUR COMMON BICYCLING MYTHS

The following myths can lead to big problems for young riders.

MYTH #1: "BICYCLISTS SHOULD RIDE FACING TRAFFIC."



This myth causes about 25% of car/bike crashes. At intersections, few drivers look for traffic coming the wrong way. Ride where folks will expect you!

MYTH #2: "A CHILD NEEDS A BIKE TO GROW INTO."

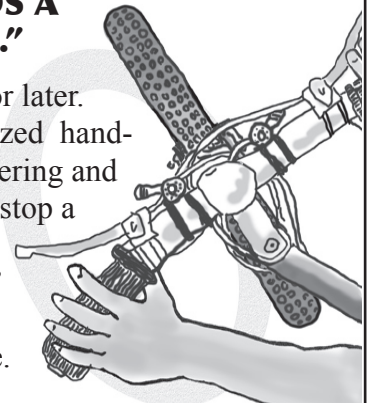


Wrong. On a big bike, kids wobble and weave down the road. They won't be able to react quickly in an emergency. Your child should be able to stand over his or her bike with both feet flat on the ground.



MYTH #3: "MY CHILD NEEDS A 21-SPEED MOUNTAIN BIKE."

Probably not. Leave the fancy bike for later. Few young kids can work standard-sized hand-brakes or confusing shifters while steering and pedaling. Ask 10-year-olds how they stop a high tech bike: "I drag my feet." "I don't stop." "I run it into something." For your child's first bike, choose a sturdy one-speed with a coaster brake.



MYTH #4: "OUR NEIGHBORHOOD IS QUIET, SO WE DON'T HAVE TO WORRY."

Many bike crashes involving children happen on quiet two-lane residential streets with 25 mph speed limits — largely because that's where kids bicycle. Sound like your street? We often forget safety in familiar surroundings, and that can lead to trouble.

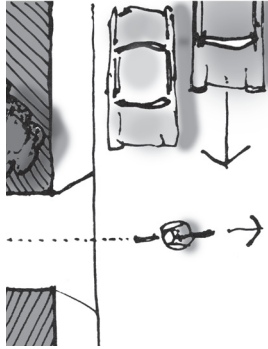


THREE COMMON BIKE/CAR CRASHES

The following are the most common crashes for young children. Each one can lead to serious injury.

CRASH TYPE #1: THE DRIVEWAY RIDE-OUT

A child rides out of the driveway and is hit by a car. This scenario accounts for about 8% of all car/bike crashes and it gets kids early: the average age is less than 10.



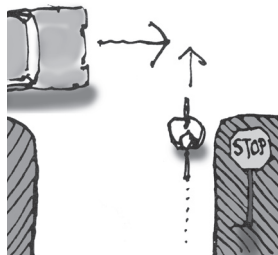
What you can do: If bushes or trees block the view, trim them back. And teach your child these safety rules:

1. Stop before entering the street.
2. If parked cars block the view, edge out to see beyond them.
3. Look left, right, and left for cars.
4. See any? Wait until it's clear.
5. No cars? Cross with care.



CRASH TYPE #2: RUNNING A STOP SIGN

One car/bike crash in ten involves a bicyclist running a stop sign. The average age is about 11. *Tip: If you "roll" stop signs, your child will learn your bad habit.*

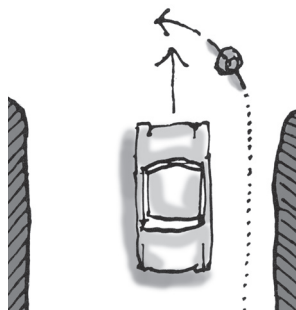


What you can do: Teach your child that running stop signs could lead to a bad crash. Take him or her to a stop sign near home. Emphasize the following:

1. Stop at all stop signs.
2. Look left, right, and left for cars.
3. See any? Wait until it's clear.
4. No cars? Cross with care.
5. And *never* run a stop sign even if a friend just did so.

CRASH TYPE #3: THE "NO LOOK" LEFT TURN

In 10% of crashes, bicyclists turned left without looking back for traffic. If they had looked, they would have seen the cars coming and likely waited until it was clear.



What you can do: Teach your child to walk across busy streets. Period. For residential streets, a 9- or 10-year-old can be taught to make safe turns:

1. Look back.
2. Yield to traffic coming from behind.
3. Yield to traffic in front or to the side.
4. Signal before moving or turning left.
5. Confused or worried? Pull to the curb and walk your bike in the crosswalk.



SERIOUS CRASHES ARE RARE

It's important to teach your child how to bicycle safely and avoid crashes. But serious bicycling crashes are rare, and the "heart healthy" benefits of bicycling far outweigh the risks.

America's childhood obesity epidemic will kill many times more kids than bicycling will. By teaching your child safe bicycling, you not only help prevent crashes, but you start him or her on the

path to an active and fun life. And by bicycling *with* your child, you, too, can benefit from the exercise.

A good idea: Contact your local bicycle club or recreation department and find out what opportunities they have for kids to learn — and enjoy — bicycling.

DO YOU KNOW YOUR SIGNALS?

Here they are!



THREE IMPORTANT BICYCLING SKILLS

Everyone should learn the following skills.

SKILL #1: RIDING A STRAIGHT LINE



This skill is basic but very important. Take your child to a park, playground, or empty parking lot for practice and find a straight paint stripe on the pavement. Have your child practice riding on the stripe without veering to one side or another. It may take some practice but your child will get better at it each time he or she tries, and that's good!

Tip: To ride straight, don't look down at the stripe. Look ahead to where you're going!

SKILL #2: LOOKING BACK WITHOUT SWERVING



Have your child ride the same stripe while you hold a cardboard picture of a car. As he or she rides past, hold the "car" up or hide it behind your back and say "LOOK!" Your child should look back and say "CAR!" or "NO CAR!"

SKILL #3: STOPPING AND SPEED CONTROL

On the playground, have your child practice riding slowly toward a wet sponge and stopping just before hitting it. Gradually increase the speed and watch for skidding (not good). As your child speeds up, he or she will need to start using the brakes sooner.

Tip: Going downhill, a bicyclist should brake gently and often to keep from going too fast and losing control. Stick to level ground until your child is ready for a bike with hand brakes.



RIDING AFTER DARK

Some serious crashes happen when it's dark. Example: a motorist comes up from behind and hits a bicyclist. These crashes often involve higher car speeds and make up about 25% of all fatal car/bike collisions.

Rule out riding after dark for your youngster. It requires special skills and equipment that few kids have. If your child gets caught out after dark, he or she should call you for a ride home. *For more info on riding at night, contact your local bicycle club or bike shop.*

Author **John Williams**, of the National Center for Bicycling & Walking, has worked in bike safety for over 35 years. Special thanks go to **Marti Daily** of the City of Indianapolis for her help and encouragement. v2.0.1

WHAT ABOUT HELMETS?



In a word: **YES!** Your child should use one every time he or she rides. Helmets can prevent head injuries and save lives. And about 75% of all bicyclists killed each year die from head injuries. Many more are injured seriously.

The cost (\$20 to \$30) is small, compared to the medical bills and grief caused by a head injury.

Go with a "CPSC-approved" helmet; there are many available in different styles and colors.

THREE IMPORTANT TIPS

1. Let your child pick out his or her helmet.
2. Follow the helmet instructions for a proper fit.
3. Wear one yourself!

This brochure was developed by the Active Living Resource Center, a program supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Additional materials for child education and making your neighborhood more bicycle friendly and walkable are available through the ALRC at: www.activelivingresources.org.



For more info:
Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition
171 Milk St. / Ste. 33 / Boston, MA 02109
617-542-BIKE (2453) / bikeinfo@massbike.org