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How To Teach Bicycle Skills

MOST of us learn how to ride a bicycle as children, and when we teach this to our children, we often realize that we don't really know how to teach this skill. We tell the child to "pedal hard" and to "steer". We give the child a push and give these commands, and cheer the child on until he/she loses balance and crashes. Then we ask the child to try again, and again. Finally, the child learns how to steer, pedal, and stay balanced at the same time. Often, we do this on grassy or soft areas, which only make each task harder. Most of the time, we use "training wheels", which allows the child to learn how to pedal and steer without having to worry about balance. With training wheels, the child often learns not to balance, and may develop habits which make balancing even harder when the training wheels are removed.

By teaching the process of balancing, we can remove the fear of learning by trial and error, and enable most children to manage a bicycle without having to have the experience of crashing. Before beginning this teaching process, you may have the child ride a bike with training wheels, but this is neither necessary nor recommended. The child has likely learned how to pedal and steer through riding a tricycle or Hot Wheels.

Stage 1 can be done anywhere, even in a garage or indoors. For stages 2 and 3, practice in a large paved area. Avoid large obstacles like jersey barriers, curbs, trees, or light poles; they act like magnets for young bikers.

Stage 1

This stage does not involve moving forward. The child sits on the bike and the adult holds the bike up, using a firm grip on the back of the seat. Explain to the child that when the bike leans to the left (make the bike lean a bit), the child needs to turn the wheel to the left (turn the wheel a bit). Have the child practice turning the wheel as you lean the bike, first one way, and then the other. Encourage the child to respond with the wheel as soon as he/she feels the bike leaning, but not to turn the wheel too much or too fast. It is often a good idea to practice this during several sessions over several days, or until the child always turns the wheel the correct way without excessive delay or exaggerated movement.

Stage 2

You are now ready to have the child practice this while the bike is moving forward. Supporting the bicycle from the back of the seat, practice the leaning a bit, then ask the child to pedal slowly. Try to have the child go at the pace of a fast walk. If the bike does not tip at all, cause the bicycle to lean a little: It is often best to allow several sessions for this, gradually allowing the child to go a bit faster each time. Continued practice is called for if the child's corrections are too slow or too much. If necessary, stationary practice may be used again.

Stage 3

This stage involves gradually increasing the forward speed of the practice. When the child is consistently correcting well, let go. Do not tell the child you are letting go, and continue to run alongside for a bit. Now that the child can move and maintain balance without support, have him or her try slow and gradual turns. Again, avoid obstacles. The child will easily though gradually learn to manage turns well.

Your child will soon be able to ride a bike like a pro!