

When it comes to parenting, there's only one...

PARENTGUIDE NEWS

A FINE BALANCE

by Liza N. Burby
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Professor Pedals, a father of two on Long Island, focuses on safety and cycling in his approach to teaching children to ride. They say you never forget how to ride a bike, but do you remember when you learned how to get on and off your first one? Now imagine teaching your child, whose main fear is that you're going to let him fall. Trying to communicate all those basic skills you now take for granted isn't easy. At least that's how Joanne McDonald of Northport felt last year when she tried to teach her children, Dylan and Cayla (now 9 and 7, respectively), how

to ride their bikes. “We had the most frustrating time because they’d get upset and feel bad about themselves, and my husband and I were assuming that all of a sudden they would just get it,” McDonald says. “All that happened is the bikes wound up back in the shed because the kids didn’t want to learn anymore.” Then a friend gave Dylan a private lesson with Professor Pedals, who for three years has been teaching kids how to ride bikes and use scooters.

“Within an hour Dylan was cycling unassisted,” McDonald says. “If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it. Cayla followed suit a week later, and now both kids want to bike ride every chance they get.” Professor Pedals, also known as Steve Finkelstein, is a father of two from Plainview who hasn’t always been the guru of cycling. In fact, Finkelstein says he grew up in retail management and worked in product planning after college.

Using his experience in training executives along with his degree in consumer studies, Finkelstein created a baby-proofing business in 1999 when he saw a need to promote better safety in and out of the home. He even demonstrated child safety on the Today Show and CNN. His interest in safety soon expanded to outdoor issues such as bike riding. “It wasn’t just the concern of wearing a helmet, though that’s important,” says Finkelstein, the father of an 8-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter. “I felt there was a need for kids to know how to ride properly, to be sidewalk smart and safe.”

The inspiration to teach kids bicycling, Finkelstein says, stemmed from his childhood love of bike riding. But the idea to start a business came when he taught his own children to ride. “My son learned to ride a two-wheeler in literally five minutes when he was 3, and my daughter, at age 6, took

about 20 minutes,” he says. “Neighbors and friends took notice. Maybe it was partly my skill. Maybe it’s in the genes. But it sure helped my reputation. People were waiting to learn with me.”

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Facing Fears When Learning to Ride a Bike

On a recent Saturday morning, Finkelstein worked with a nervous 9-year-old who was afraid that she would fall if he let go. But Finkelstein spent the hour helping her understand the concept of balance, and showing her that if she “brakes, stops, and puts her feet down wide,” she’s always in control of the bike. At the end of the lesson, she was confidently scooting along, eager to try again.

“Fear of falling is the No. 1 issue for kids, and sometimes parents have a hard time

helping them with that,” Finkelstein says. “Kids are good at pulling out the emotional card with their parents. If kids just understand that the bike does want to fall, but if you know what to do you can be safe, it makes them feel much more in control.” Finkelstein also works with children who have special needs. He says one of the most moving experiences for him was teaching a 12-year-old girl on the autism spectrum.

“Her family was taking a trip and her sisters were going to be riding bikes, so her dad wanted her to learn too. She did it, and her dad sent me a photo of her riding with them. It was an unbelievable achievement for her, and it was so rewarding for me.”

He was also inspired by an 18-year-old student with visual impairment who had failed his road test but needed transportation at college to get to classes.

“He had never done anything active, but he needed a way to get around, so he decided

to learn to ride a bike—and he was riding in his first lesson,” Finkelstein says.

His oldest student is a woman in her 60s who put learning to ride a bike on her bucket list. She plans “a big reveal to her kids and grandkids soon.”

Biking is a big part of family life for Finkelstein, who commutes via bike. “For me, a day in the bike shop is like a day in the candy store,” he says. “I help students break barriers and build skills right by their side. It’s good to do what you love, and I am passionate about teaching kids to ride bikes.”

For more information on Professor Pedals, visit professorpedals.com.

Training Wheels: Yay or Nay?

Parents often assume that learning to ride a bicycle with training wheels is a safe approach, but Finkelstein disagrees. “The problem is that, while kids may feel secure, it actually can cause them to fall because

it's a different process than riding a bike," he says. "It makes turns more challenging because they lean more and their balance skills aren't mastered. And the wheels can get caught on curbs and brick." It's better, he says, to use a progressive approach so the child works up to riding a two-wheeler. That means learning to balance by keeping your feet on the ground and scooting.

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