

When Is My Child Ready... ^[1]

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to Ride a Tricycle?

What you need to know to help make your child's first three-wheel adventure a thrill.

Steve Finkelstein, (above, right) founder of the bicycle riding school Professor Pedals and author of Professor Pedals Bicycle Riding 101, shares how to know if your child is ready to get rolling. Joanne Van Zuidam reports:

Riding a trike is a treasured childhood tradition. Are there special skills that a child needs to have before he can start pedaling?

The most important trait a child should have is interest. With interest he will learn and perform at his own pace without fear. Maturity also plays a role. A rider should be mature enough to respect other riders, pedestrians, and traffic in his path. This will become invaluable as he progress to two-wheeled bicycles and, yes... eventually cars! Physically, leg and core strength play an important role in riding a tricycle. Leg strength promotes movement of the tricycle, and core strength primarily helps to maintain balance. Participation in balance activities or playing with push toys or strollers indicates that your child is ready to roll.

Why do some children seem to understand the implicit thrill of riding a trike and can't wait to hop on while others are apprehensive?

The fears associated with riding trikes and bikes are usually second to the fear of the unknown. Once a child knows the mechanics and operational requirements of a tricycle or bicycle, she can commit to the riding process in a confident and safe way. And once she feels she is in control, she will be more excited to learn and ride. Other fears, such as the fear of falling or going too fast, are actually in the rider's control. Some children have a difficult time with tricycle riding because of the mechanics. Tricycles can be hard to ride because a "pull-drive" system powers the trike. In other words, the pedaling power and output comes from the front wheel. Bicycle power, on the other hand, comes from the rear wheel, which is easier to move. To teach your child to three-wheel, have her mount the tricycle with her feet on the ground—not the pedals—and demonstrate the circular motion and power requirements to show how it works. In time, she should get the hang of it!

What if a child is not getting the hang of it?

Relax. Pressure on a child learning to ride tends to lead to a stressful situation. Readiness comes at different ages and stages. If there is a long-term lack of interest or ability, bring it to the

attention of your pediatrician since it may be a sign of coordination or balance issues.

Okay, he's off and pedaling. Got any tips to keep a kid safe? Are some surfaces easier than others for practicing?

It's a good idea to limit or remove bells, baskets, and other bike accessories at first (or indefinitely if they prove to be an ongoing distraction). These could impinge on the learning and riding process. Kids may lose focus on the skills as they pay attention to these items and not watch where they are going. A flat, smooth, traffic-free surface, such as a sidewalk, driveway, or empty parking lot is ideal for riding, but a well-supervised area is critical to safety. If possible, set markers or cones to create boundaries. Kids on tricycles are very low to the ground and may not be visible to cars in driveways or in the riding area. Kids should wear brightly colored clothing and helmets to increase their visibility. A used helmet is fine—as long as it fits, and the straps and buckles function properly to hold the helmet in position. If you have to buy a new helmet, a bicycle dealer will have different styles and models. Don't be fooled by price—helmets at these retailers are all equally safe. The price difference is due to features such as comfort and design. Also important: You should wear a helmet when riding, too, for safety, and to set a good example. Taking these precautions now helps set riding safety standards later when kids progress to two wheels.

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