

Enable Ireland's Bicycle Skills Part 1: Learning to Ride a Bike - the Balance Bike Method

For some children with co-ordination difficulties, learning to ride a bike without stabilisers can be a real challenge. If this is a goal your child would like to achieve, try the Balance Bike Method.

The first stage of learning to ride a bike is *wanting* to ride a bike. It can be a scary experience for all children so start off gently and offer lots of praise and encouragement for all your child's efforts. There are plenty of great videos your child can watch first to see the steps below (follow links at the end). Helmets are essential and elbow and knee pads can give extra protection for the less confident rider.

Depending on your child's size, they may want to learn this Balance Bike Method either using a specific 'balance bike' or converting their own bike into a balance bike. The geometry of a balance bike is specifically set for learning to ride pedal-free and children can often find it easier on a specific balance bike. Generally, balance bikes are typically available in 10" or 12" (suitable for ages between 2-5 approximately). Strider Bikes© produce balance bikes of larger sizes also.

Converting your own bike into a balance bike

If your child has outgrown a 12" balance bike and you want to convert your own bike into a balance bike, there are several steps which you will need to do:

1. Remove the pedals. This can be done with a spanner and it is only necessary to remove the pedal and not the crank.
2. Lower the seat. When a bike technician is measuring for bike size, the child should have only the ball of both feet on the ground when seated on the saddle. However, when fitting the seat height when it is being used as a balance bike, both feet should be able to be firmly on the ground with a slight knee bend only.

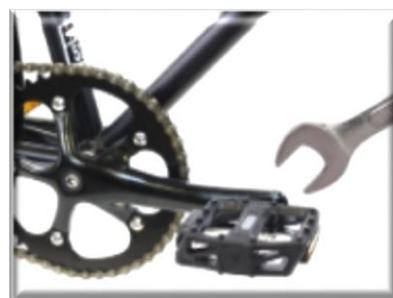


Image from facebook.com/theadventurebiker

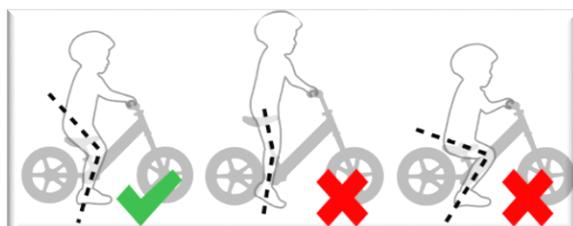


Image from strider.com

3. Adjust the height of the handlebars if necessary, so that it is level to your child at mid-torso height. On both the seat post and handlebar stem there are minimum insertion markings. For your child's safety, insert the posts into the frame far enough so that the lines do not show.

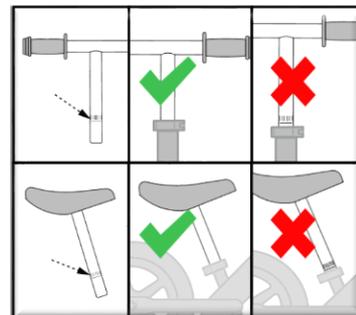


Image from strider.com

The Balance Bike Method

1. Your child can start by sitting on the seat, keeping both feet on the ground and rocking the bike from side to side to start feeling where 'mid-line' is.
2. It is important when using a balance bike that your child is fully weight-bearing on the seat rather than merely perched on it. It may take some time for your child to trust the seat as their base of support rather than their feet. Try playing games such as asking them to wave with one hand, then the other, then both so that they are only sitting and resting their feet on the ground. To test their balance further, try playing catch with a large soft ball or balloon with them seated on the saddle. When supporting your child to learn these stages, try to avoid the urge to hold up your child's bike as it is important for them to feel the side to side movement of the bike.
3. Next try encouraging them to scoot their legs along whilst seated on the saddle. Encourage them to keep their feet away from the bike so that their legs don't hit against the crank if you have converting their own bike into a balance bike. Some children find this stage hard and will want to stand again, not trusting all their weight on the seat. Try placing a 'tail' such as a long grass or strip of a plastic bag under their bottom and encourage them not to let their 'tail' blow away.
4. As their confidence grows, they will trust the seat more and be able to gain more speed as they move along. Strider© have produced a great guide to various games which can be played to keep making this fun. For example, Sleepy Bear game suggests you encourage your child to pretend to be various animals whilst riding around which will help them manoeuvre their bike in different ways without giving it much thought.
5. Next try encouraging some free-wheeling. Using chalk, try drawing a



Image from kidobikes.pl

pond on the ground with 'feet-eating fish' in it. Encourage your child to ride up to the pond then lift their feet over the pond to stop the fish gobbling them.

6. Encourage them to 'free-wheel' for as long as they can, counting for them as soon as they lift their feet. Using an even smooth very slightly downhill slope can assist with momentum. Avoid grass as it can be too uneven and does not allow the bike to roll as easily.



Image from strider.com

There are several ways you will know your child is ready for the next stage of putting the pedals back on the bike:

-  Your child is able to propel the bike confidently and glide/freewheel for long distances.
-  They can handle their bike downhill without choosing to put their feet down
-  They can manage to avoid obstacles and steer around paths freely
-  They are wanting to move to the next stage and put pedals on.

Learning to Pedal

1. Place one pedal back on the bike (let your child choose which side). Remember each pedal is specific to right or left and an 'R' or 'L' is usually stamped onto the pedal

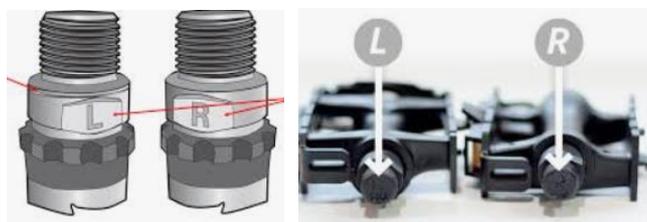


Image from tredz.co.uk

2. Encourage your child to place one foot onto the pedal with the other foot remaining on the ground, and remain in this position without losing balance, staying still for the count of 10. Your child will need to learn to lean the bike slightly to maintain balance. Try this with the pedal set at different positions (e.g. high up or low down)

3. Start with the pedal at the lowest point in its revolution and encourage your child to leave their foot on this pedal and scoot along with their other foot along the ground. As their confidence grows in this stage, they will be able to gain speed and maintain balance.
4. Once they are comfortable with this, they should be able to leave the foot on the pedal and free-wheel with the other foot off the ground.
5. At this stage, they are ready for the remaining pedal to be placed on. Encourage them to repeat the stage before but as they gain speed, they can place the 'scooting' foot onto the pedal and start pedalling.
6. As they gain confidence they may want to start off by having their foot on the pedal at the '2 o'clock' position (just forwards from its upmost position) and push down hard to initiate forward motion then place their second foot on the other pedal when enough speed is gained.
7. As your child becomes a consistently independent rider, the seat height and possibly handlebar height will need to be raised, or possibly they will require a new bike in the next size up.



Helmets

It is essential for children to wear a helmet when learning to cycle. Some younger children can resist these but be encouraged with more 'fun' designs. Wearing it in the correct way is also very important too. Most decent helmets have an adjustable fit system at the rear which can be tightened once the helmet is in the right position on your child's head. With this tightened, your child should be able to look between their legs in the standing position (i.e with their helmet towards the ground) and the helmet should not fall off. The straps can then be fastened with a two finger gap between the strap and their neck. If your child is fearful of pinching their skin, encourage them to fasten this clip whilst facing a mirror.

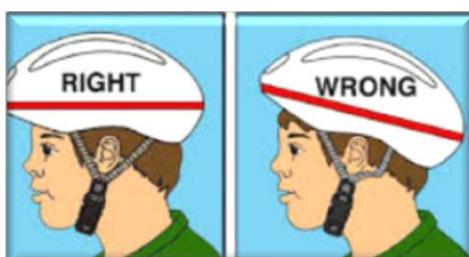


Image from campusbikeshop.com

Getting on the bike

Some children with co-ordination difficulties can find the balance required to get on/ off the bike challenging. One way to make this a little easier is to lay the bike on the ground and step over the cross-bar first before bringing it upright by the handlebars.



Image from strider.com

Useful Guides & Videos

- 🚲 Cycling Ireland provide great resources as part of their Cycle Right program including resources on Independent Cycling with a Disability <http://www.cycleright.ie/resources>
- 🚲 Cycling Ireland run many great courses offered through local bike clubs and school such as the Sprocket Rocket course for independent riders (5 to 11 year olds) <http://www.cyclingireland.ie/page/programmes/sprocket-rocket>
- 🚲 This is an extremely well written guide with great suggestions on games to make learning to ride a bike fun.
- 🚲 <https://www.striderbikes.com/learn-to-ride/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Strider-Learn-to-Stride-Guide.pdf>
- 🚲 This company below also offer balance bikes which convert into first bikes with pedals.
- 🚲 <https://www.littlebigbikes.com/balance-bikes-explained-everything-you-need-to-know/>
- 🚲 https://www.trekbikes.com/ie/en_IE/equipment/cycling-accessories/bike-helmets/kids-bike-helmets/bontrager-little-dipper-childrens-bike-helmet/p/30489/
- 🚲 This is an example of a helmet available with the Fidlock© system which is a more child friendly way to close the chin strap on a helmet.
- 🚲 Each year, at the end of June, Bike Week is celebrated nationwide with free biking events on and inclusive family activities in the community.

