

Teach Bike Riding In One Hour

By Michael H. Kelly

No kidding! In six easy steps your child will be confidently spinning his wheels.

That Great American Pastime known as "teaching your kid to ride a bike" ranks right up there on the parent-unpleasantness scale with telling your kid about sex—only worse. You don't tell your kid about sex with all the neighbors standing around thinking, if not saying, "He's doing it all wrong."

It never fails. No matter how carefully you watch and wait until there's no one on the street, as soon as you step out the door with your child and his new bike, your neighbors suddenly appear. *All* your neighbors suddenly appear. Neighbors you've never seen before. Neighbors with relatives.

Neighbors with people they've met in malls, bars, bus stops. Neighbors with bag ladies, Bedouin nomads, the Altar and Rosary Society from Saint Hyacinth's. Hundreds, thousands of neighborly people line the street.

Or so it seems.

And you puff and wheeze and run yourself silly up and down that narrow, endless ribbon of sidewalk while these neighbors offer can't-fail suggestions: "It's all in his butt. Tell him he's gotta feel it in his butt."

You sweat, redden, and smile, then run the gauntlet again and tell yourself this is quality time you're spending with your child.

Illustrated by Richard Williams



That's the way it was for me anyway. But after several weekends of turfed lawns, trashed tulip beds, a battered bike, a bruised kid, and a near-terminal loss of human dignity, I figured it was time to engage in another Great American Pastime known as "inventing a better way." Here it is: how to teach bike riding in one hour *without* running yourself silly. It's easy. And it's kid-tested.

1 How long would it have taken us to learn to walk as babies if we had had to learn by walking on the side of a two-by-four? We'd still be crawling on our hands and knees, ruining expensive clothes, and having a tough time on the dance floor. Learning to ride a bike on a sidewalk is a little like learning to walk on a two-by-four.

Your kid can't even sit on a bike yet and you're asking him to master the complex art of steering down a narrow strip of cement between the terrifying, forbidden zones of neighbors' lawns. Put the bike in the car. Take it and your kid to a school playground or empty church parking lot—someplace where he won't have to worry about steering until he learns how to stay up.

2 Most of us "just learn" how to ride a bike in a single, blazing, inspired moment after a suitable period of bashing our knees on the ground—sometimes for as long as two summers. One moment we can't ride to save our lives. The next moment we can. We know how. But we don't know *the how*.

The fact is, there is a real *method* to riding a bike and the secret is all in the front wheel. Simply put, when you start to fall right, turn the front wheel right and when you start to fall left, turn the front wheel left.

This is the *technique* we master in our "inspired moment." We think we learned the balance, the feel, of bike riding. What we really learned was a way to stop the tilt of a falling bike by turning the wheel (think of it as sticking your leg out) while at the same time redirecting the momentum of the bike, allowing it to right itself. Of course, in actual practice, we constantly make these small, front-wheel adjustments—adjustments so small we don't even notice them.

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3 You're in an empty church parking lot. Your kid is on his bike, feet on the pedals, hands on the handlebars. You're holding him up by the back of his bike seat. Next move is don't move—not one puffing, wheezing, sweating inch. Here's where you teach *the how*.

Tilt the bike to the right and to the left. Tell your child, "When you start feeling yourself fall this way (right), turn your front wheel this way (right). When you start feeling yourself fall this way (left), turn your front wheel this way (left)." Stand there, without moving, for five or ten minutes practicing with your child. Tilt the bike unexpectedly one way and then the other until your child gets the hang of turning the front wheel into tilts.

4 Walk, don't run, with your child. Move slowly. Hold lightly on to the back of his bike seat. The concept of turning the front wheel into a fall is easy to understand. But, there are two things your child will probably do that you should practice here: he will wait until he's tilting too far into the fall before correcting with the front wheel, or he will overcorrect and go right into a fall/correct situation in the opposite direction.

Explain to your child that he wants to correct early. Tilt him very slightly and show him how far to correct with the front wheel. Tilt him a little more and show him how much he'll have to turn the wheel to correct. Show him that if he waits too long, he'll either crash or start losing control in the other direction.

5 You will have to run a little now. But you won't have to do it for long, and, even better, you won't

have to do it in front of the neighbors. Run slowly at first. Let your child set the pace. Stay a little back, just out of your child's field of peripheral vision. Hold lightly on to the back of the bike seat. Let go of the seat as soon as possible for as long as possible. Don't let your child know when you're holding and when you're not. Saying "I'm letting go now" is like saying "Look over your shoulder, son. Panic. And run your bike into that wire fence over there."

Now you'll see why the wide-open spaces are important. Your young novice bicyclist will dip, loop, zigzag, ride in crazy circles. At times it will seem as if your child is in a slow-motion death spiral, when suddenly some invisible hand will push him upright. You'll die a thousand times in the next fifteen minutes. And, of course, there will be a few crashes—but it won't be long now.

Your child will still be waiting too long before correcting with the front wheel. He'll still overcorrect, too. When the ride gets too crazy, stop him. Give him a breather. Remind him to correct sooner with the front wheel. Then go at it again.

At some point (you'll know when), stop running alongside your youngster and let him go. After 50 or 60 yards he'll realize you're not there. He'll look around—probably crash—but when he sees how far back you are, he'll know he can ride. There's no stopping him after that.

6 Once he's riding, let him ride. He's proud of himself. He still can't believe it. Let him ride, build confidence, and have fun. Help him get on and off the bike. Help him stop. Let him go.

Before you leave, you can show him how to get on the bike—at a stoop or stair if necessary—and how to brake. But don't practice these things now—unless he wants to. He'll pick them up quickly on his own.

In fact, in a day or two, he'll be riding as if he were born with wheels instead of legs. A day or two after that he'll be asking for a bigger, faster, spiffier bike. And not long after that, you'll be reading another article similar to this: "How to tell your kid about sex without breaking out in hives and swallowing your tongue." ●

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