

HOW TO:

# GET YOUR CHILD CYCLING

EVERYDAY CYCLING FOR FAMILIES



## Want to cycle with your family, as a practical, low-cost and enjoyable way of getting around?

Many everyday journeys are short enough to walk or cycle, with a little bit of planning and practice. At roughly three times faster than walking, cycling is great for journeys which seem too far on foot. Active travel wakes your family up so they are ready for action and learning. Using a bike helps develop independence and confidence from an early age. It also saves you money, with no petrol, parking costs or bus fares to pay for. Above all, most children are keen to cycle: it's fun!

**This factsheet aims to inspire you to give cycling a go with your children, for fun and for routine journeys such as school, activities, errands and seeing friends. It focuses on the practicalities, covering:**

- 1) Getting started: getting the right bike; learning to ride; and developing skills and confidence.
- 2) Everyday cycling: planning your routes; safe and considerate cycling; looking after the bike; and everyday practicalities such as clothing and luggage
- 3) Next steps: cycling to and at school; and cycling support for adults.
- 4) Further information

## 1 GETTING STARTED

### 1.1 Getting the Right Bike

- Make sure that the bike is the right size for the rider. A bike that's too big or too small is hard to control and puts the cyclist at risk. It is also uncomfortable and could cause leg and back problems.
- The cyclist should just be able to touch the ground with their toes when sitting on the seat; adjust the saddle to the right height. The handlebars should be comfortable to hold so adjust their height as necessary.
- Make sure the bike has basic fittings, such as a bell and reflectors.
- Ensure your child can easily reach and operate the brake levers.
- Mudguards help keep the rider clean and dry in damp weather. A chainguard can be useful too.
- A good bike doesn't have to be an expensive one. Full suspension and lots of gears are unnecessary for everyday cycling, and get in the way for beginners. A more light-weight bike can help though.

### 1.2 Learning to ride

- 'Balance bikes' (also known as scooter bikes) are great for starting off. Alternatively, simply take the pedals off your child's bike.
- Find a quiet place with plenty of space and encourage your child to sit on the saddle and scoot around to get the hang of balancing before trying with pedals too.
- Build confidence one little step at a time. Practise braking, steering and turning. Go at your child's pace, make it fun, and do lots of this before you head out 'for real'.
- Riding on a tag-along, a bike tow-bar or a tandem also helps develop balance, pedalling and general road awareness.



#### DID YOU KNOW...

- Most good bike shops now have a range of child bikes and child-carrying kit.
- Check out Nearly New Sales, school bike sales, e-Bay and Gumtree for second-hand tag-alongs, trailers and child bikes.
- The Bike Station, Edinburgh's bicycle recycling and cycling promotion charity, sells quality re-conditioned bikes (adult and child). [www.thebikestation.org.uk](http://www.thebikestation.org.uk)

#### DID YOU KNOW...

There are various options for parents who need to get about with children who are either too young to cycle by themselves or inexperienced beginners:

- Tag-Alongs (or 'trailer bikes') are one-wheeled 'half bikes' (saddle, handlebars and pedals) towed behind an adult bike.
- Tow-bars are fittings that attach a child's bike rigidly to an adult's bike. They can usually fold up so the child can switch between being towed and riding independently.
- Tandems are bikes for two (or more) people pedalling together. Some models are designed specifically for adult and child, with potential for a toddler-seat too.

For more info in the Spokes factsheet 'How to be a Cycling Family' (January 2011), from [www.spokes.org.uk](http://www.spokes.org.uk) (Go to Downloads → Advice → Commuting-with-kids)

See if you can get a test-run before you commit to a particular option. Check suitability for your bike model, consult a reputable dealer before buying, and practise first on quiet roads without your child before taking them out too.

### 1.3 Preparing to Cycle Independently

Younger cyclists and beginners will need plenty of practice and guidance before riding on road by themselves.

- Starting on quiet roads, encourage your child to develop skills such as looking over their right shoulder to check traffic coming from behind. Keep early journeys short.
- Help them develop their road awareness and judgement by talking as you go along about the potential hazards you see and how to avoid them. Encourage your child to spot hazards ahead such as potholes and uneven road surfaces, as well as other road users.
- Road position should be an arms-length out rather than right by the kerb. Keep an eye on your child by having them cycle in front of you, within talking distance for instructions.
- Mirrors fitted to handlebars can be useful for awareness of what's coming up from behind.

The more you and your child cycle, the easier it becomes. You'll cover quite long distances easily before you know it and with a real buzz from the achievement. Two miles can soon take only 10-15 minutes by bike.

### 1.4 Looking after Bikes

A faulty bike is not safe to ride, so check it regularly.

- Front and back brakes: pads wear down and should be checked regularly to ensure good contact with the wheel when used, and replaced from time to time.
- Chain: should move smoothly. Clean and oil regularly to avoid rust, especially in wet weather and winter.
- Tyres: keep firm and well-but not over-inflated. Soft tyres make cycling uncomfortable and cause punctures more easily. Reinforced 'puncture resistant' tyres are well worth the investment.



Photo: C Hargest

- Handlebars and saddle: ensure that these are straight and secure.
- Gears: these can slip over time, and may need to be adjusted. (This can be tricky and sometimes better left to a professional; most bike shops offer services).

- Front and back lights: make sure batteries are fully charged so lights are clearly visible, especially at dusk.

A well-maintained bike is less likely to go wrong so consider investing in your bike maintenance skills or a yearly service from a shop.

- Develop your child's sense of ownership and responsibility for their bike: encourage them to look after it and teach them the basics of maintenance and repairs.
- On longer journeys, it is a good idea to carry a quick-repair kit with you, just in case. This should include a pump, a bike tool, and a puncture repair kit (tyre levers and patches, and perhaps a replacement inner tube to save time). Make sure you can use this kit: practise beforehand.

### 1.5 Parking and Storing Bikes

- Think about where best to leave bikes when out and about. Just leaning a bike against a lamp-post might cause it to slide down, get damaged and get in people's way. Look out for the sets of 'Sheffield' racks now found around Edinburgh
- Use a bike lock that a thief can't cut through. It might cost £20-£30 but is a very worthwhile investment. Lock the frame and ideally both wheels to something fixed, especially if you have quick-release wheels (a cable lock is useful too).
- Take removable things such as lights and panniers with you.
- If you have to store your bike outdoors, try to keep it under cover and protected from weather, e.g., under a cheap canvass motorcycle cover.
- Contact the Police to find out about bicycle registration and security marking.
- If you have limited space at home, the Spokes factsheet "How to be a Cycling Flat-Dweller" might give you some ideas. [www.spokes.org.uk](http://www.spokes.org.uk) (Go to Downloads → Technical → Spokes storage project)

## 2 EVERYDAY CYCLING

### 2.1 Planning Your Routes

Keep cycling stress-free and enjoyable by choosing your route carefully to avoid busy main roads, awkward junctions and steep hills. It is particularly important to plan – and ideally test – your route before taking a beginner. Longer but quieter routes may actually be quicker by bike with fewer stops for traffic lights.

Several good maps are available to help you plan routes around Edinburgh:

- The Spokes Cycle Maps mark less busy routes, cycle paths and cut-throughs, as well as cycle shops, hills, cobblestones and other features relevant to cyclists. They are available from most bike shops. You can also order them direct from Spokes (maps for Edinburgh, East-, Mid- and West- Lothian, and Glasgow).
- Edinburgh Council's "Explore Edinburgh by Bike" leaflets ([bit.ly/nuXknM](http://bit.ly/nuXknM)) cover the city area-by-area, and note interesting things you will see along the way. Download these leaflets or order copies from Clarence ([0800 232323](tel:0800232323) / [clarence@edinburgh.gov.uk](mailto:clarence@edinburgh.gov.uk)), or ask for them at your local library.
- Sustrans is a national cycling organisation which looks after the National Cycle Network, with routes 1 and 75 going through Edinburgh. Sustrans produces detailed maps that show traffic-free routes across Scotland. Routes in town are signposted with blue signs and a red route number. [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)

### 2.2 Getting to Know Your Routes

- Practise your regular routes with your child when it's quiet on the road.
- Talk them through tricky junctions by stopping in a safe place by the roadside before you get to that tricky point.
- Gradually build up the distances you go and try out new routes.
- Once your child is able and responsible enough to cycle independently, accompany them on all new journeys a few times before they travel on their own. Plan each new journey carefully, considering the challenges they will face against their abilities.



#### DID YOU KNOW...

There are now lots of online tools you can use to plan your route.

- [www.cyclestreets.net](http://www.cyclestreets.net) helps find the best cycle route between two given points.
- [www.walkit.com](http://www.walkit.com) is designed for walkers, but useful routes for cyclists too.
- Find safe cycle routes located in a particular area from [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk). Download the Sustrans National Cycle Network app to help plan routes when you are out and about.

### 2.3 Safe and Considerate Cycling

#### Be Seen

- Bright coloured clothing makes you more visible on the road, particularly at dusk and in bad weather.
- It is illegal to cycle without adequate lights in the dark. You are required by law to have a white light at the front and a red light at the rear (steady or flashing). LED cycle lights are reliable and additional flashing lights can be attached to clothing, rucksacks and panniers.
- Wearing something reflective also increases visibility in the dark. Armbands, trouser bands and clips, vests, stickers and bags with reflective patches are readily available from bike shops.

#### Be Alert

With the right approach, cycling is a relatively safe activity. As your child learns to ride, you can support them to develop a wider awareness of their surroundings.

- Teach them to spot hazards, especially around driveways and junctions, and teach them how to make appropriate judgements around these hazards. Discourage distractions such as earphones while cycling.

There are some particular hazards for cyclists, especially young ones, to look out for:

- Watch for cars moving out of or pulling into driveways and crossing your pathway
- Take extreme care when cycling around lorries and buses. Their mirrors have 'blind spots' and their drivers may simply not see you. Do not cycle up their left side: they can easily trap you against their side on the curb side, especially when they turn.
- Give parked vehicles a wide berth, in case doors are swung open in front of you.
- When changing direction or moving out into the road (e.g., round a parked vehicle), check around you and signal.
- Avoid cycling in the gutter (which can also have a worse road surface). Cycling an arm's length out is safer because you're more visible, with the gutter there as a place of retreat if necessary.

#### Be Responsible

- Always stop at red lights. Bikes are traffic, and jumping lights is illegal, as well as risky.
- The Highway Code says "You MUST NOT cycle on a pavement", unless it is marked otherwise. Cycle only on 'shared use' paths (for bikes and pedestrians), indicated with blue signs.



- However, pavement riding by children up to the age of ten is generally tolerated. Obviously, apply consideration and commonsense.

- If in doubt about safety, e.g., over busy stretches with faster traffic or difficult junctions, get off and walk until you feel the danger has passed.

#### Be Considerate

- Teach your children to be considerate to other road users and to pedestrians, especially on shared paths. Slow down and use the bell before passing, then give plenty of room.
- Take particular care near dogs, young children, and elderly people, who may not be aware of you and may move unpredictably.
- If you must use the pavement, get off your bike, and walk until you can re-join the road.

#### DID YOU KNOW...

Despite what many people think, and for good reasons, the use of cycle helmets is not compulsory under the law, and is a matter for personal choice. Clearly, wearing a helmet does not prevent accidents, and can even make them more likely if the effect on the wearer is to regard themselves as invincible. Helmet-wearing is a subject of considerable debate. For further information and research see [www.cyclehelmets.org](http://www.cyclehelmets.org)

Helmets are designed to give protection only for very low impact (e.g. from simply falling from off a bike). To be of any use at all, they must be worn correctly. They need to fit, sit squarely on the head covering the forehead, and straps should be securely fastened. Twisted straps can cause injury. They must conform to a recognised safety standard and be replaced after impact.

## 2.4 Clothing and Carrying Things

You don't need special clothing to cycle! Take things at a comfortable pace and you won't get hot and sweaty.

- Make sure that you have nothing catching in your wheels or chain. Use trouser bands (velcro or 'slapbands'), or tuck trousers ends into socks.
- With girls' bike frames, cycling in a skirt is possible too.
- Make sure shoes won't slip off feet or pedals.
- Get a water-proof coat (and trousers) for wet days, and gloves for cold ones.
- Small things can be carried in a rucksack. However, cycling with a big heavy rucksack is uncomfortable and can damage your back, as well as affecting your balance. Larger loads can be carried in panniers (some converting into rucksacks or shoulder bags) or a front basket. For regular large items, consider a trailer or 'bike hod' (to fit to larger bikes). Pannier racks can go at the front if you have a bike seat at the back.

## 3 NEXT STEPS

### 3.1 Cycling to School

Where route improvements are needed for safe cycling to school (e.g. because of tricky junctions or heavy traffic), the best way forward is for parents to work with the school and local authority to devise a School Travel Plan to highlight these concerns and propose ways to resolve them. Cycle lanes, safe crossings, traffic calming measures to reduce vehicle speeds and redesign of tricky junctions have all been implemented as a direct result of parents' concerns around cycling to school.

- Sustrans works with local authorities to support the development of school travel

plans. Read more about 'Developing a School Travel Plan' at [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)

- Cycling Scotland runs the Cycle Friendly Schools award in Scotland for schools who are committed to increasing the number of cycling pupils, to benefit both children's health and their environment. Ask your school if it has the award or what it is doing towards achieving it (e.g., providing bike parking or lockers for storing kit during the day) [www.cyclingscotland.org](http://www.cyclingscotland.org)

- Consider safety in numbers: could you join up with other local families heading the same way on regular journeys such as the school-run? Maybe there's scope to travel together as a 'bike bus'?



### 3.2 Cycling at School

- Speak to your child's school about providing the Bikeability Scotland training programme to pupils. This is run by Cycling Scotland for schools, usually working through the local authority Road Safety officers, and has 3 levels: bike control skills, followed by on-road skills, then developing independent cycling and safety in traffic for older pupils.

Cycling Scotland is encouraging volunteer assistants, with training and support available. Contact your local Active Schools Co-ordinator via your local school or your

child's teacher in an independent school and get involved where you can.

- Many schools have Bike Clubs where pupils learn basic maintenance skills, hold events like Bike Breakfasts and organise rides. Bike Sales are also very popular.

- Bike Week ([www.bikeweek.org.uk](http://www.bikeweek.org.uk)), Bike to School Week and Walk to School Week take place around spring - early summer each year and provide extra motivation for initiatives on active school travel. See [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk) for ideas of what you and your school could organise and resources to support this activity.

### 3.3 Becoming an Adult Cyclist

If you're relatively new to cycling yourself, consider building your skills and confidence with cycle training.

- Can you mend a puncture? There are plenty of online maintenance tutorials, e.g., Weldtite, Park Tools, and YouTube.

- Talk to an organisation such as the Edinburgh Bike Station, for cycling skills or maintenance training, or see Cycling Scotland's website for a list of qualified trainers.

- Could you find a bike buddy: perhaps someone who's already experienced to provide support, or another like-minded parent who is interested in giving it a go too?

- There are various clubs that organise taster and longer rides, e.g., CTC; see the weblinks below.

- Ask your workplace if it participates in the Cycle to Work scheme, which encourages employee cycling through a tax-deductible salary-sacrifice that allows considerable savings on purchase cost.

[www.cyclescheme.co.uk](http://www.cyclescheme.co.uk)

**Happy Cycling!**

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.spokes.org.uk](http://www.spokes.org.uk)

Spokes campaigns for better conditions for using a bike for everyday work and leisure journeys. Spokes produces highly-regarded cycle maps for Edinburgh, the Lothians and Glasgow, it publishes a range of information, organises rides and other events and maintains a useful website.

[www.thebikestation.org.uk](http://www.thebikestation.org.uk)

Edinburgh's bicycle recycling charity. Quality re-conditioned bikes (adult and child) at good prices; cycle training, maintenance skills and more.

[www.edinburgh.gov.uk/cycling](http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/cycling)

City of Edinburgh Council cycling information, map-leaflets, and other useful web-links.

[www.citycyclingedinburgh.org](http://www.citycyclingedinburgh.org)

Cycling discussion forums, and other information

[www.cyclingscotland.org/get-cycling](http://www.cyclingscotland.org/get-cycling)

Everything you need to know about cycling in Scotland

[www.whycycle.co.uk](http://www.whycycle.co.uk)

Impartial advice for new and potential cyclists in the UK

[www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)

Cycling with Children leaflet, and Get Cycling - a Guide to choosing and using your bike.

**SPOKES**  
The Lothian Cycle Campaign

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