

Teach Kids Safety Rules Before They Hit The Roads

by Diane Bishop

If you have children 6 years old or older, chances are they have bicycles. We parents are responsible for teaching our children how to ride safely before they head for the streets.

With some basic knowledge and lots of practice, children can become skilled riders on neighborhood streets, and later on the streets that lead to school and beyond.

The law - Your child's bicycle is considered a vehicle under Oregon law. Children have the same rights and responsibilities as adult motorists. It's up to you (and it's required by law) to make sure your child lives up to those responsibilities. They include knowing how to signal properly to indicate turns, riding with the flow of traffic, stopping at stop signs and red lights, and having a red rear reflector and bright headlight for limited-visibility situations.

Helmets - Buy a helmet for your child. Children generally suffer more serious head injuries than do adults. The most important way to keep your children alive is to train them to ride well, but there may be a time when knowledge and training are not enough. An accident that causes permanent brain damage or death to a rider not wearing a helmet, may only cause headache for a helmeted rider. Don't forget how important you are as a role model; never ride without your helmet.

Observe - Watch your young riders to determine how much responsibility they can handle. Experts say few children younger than 9 can ride on streets without adult supervision. Children's field of vision is one-third that of adults, so they may not see you even if they look back. They have trouble judging the speed and distance of oncoming cars. They believe that adults will look out for them, and they lack a sense of danger.

Maintenance - Be sure to check your child's bicycle monthly for maintenance defects. Brakes should work well, tires should be inflated, the chain oiled, and loose parts tightened. If you don't have the time or training, tougher work can be done inexpensively at a bike shop.

Riding on Sidewalks - Many parents require their children to ride on the sidewalk. However, we have a high number of sidewalk accidents in Eugene. Accidents occur when motorists fail to scan all directions before entering a roadway from a driveway or side street. Bicyclists either assume they will be seen or they're traveling too fast to stop. If your children ride on sidewalks, it's important they understand when cars are present, state law requires bicyclists to cross driveways and side streets at walking speed. Common sense also suggests that riders stop if they're not sure a motorist sees them. Children often make the assumption that if they can see a driver, a driver can see them.

Riding on Streets - It isn't necessary to dig up the driver's manual to teach children to ride in traffic or teach them every skill at once. You can begin simply and add information as children are ready. Some third- and fourth-graders can negotiate streets near home but are not ready to ride to school or to run errands on busier streets.

Basic Concepts for Beginning Cyclists - Children learn best by applying these principles. Once they learn what to do, they need lots of practice on the following skills:

- Riding on the right side of the road, not the left (unless it is a one way street) and not on the sidewalk. Ride in a straight line, allowing room to pass parked cars and maneuver around debris; about 3 feet from the curb and 1 1/2 feet from a parked car should do. Always ride with the flow of traffic.
- Yielding to crossing traffic when reaching a major road. This includes leaving a driveway (the drive is considered a smaller road).
- Yielding to overtaking and oncoming traffic when moving across lanes of traffic. When making a left turn, look for traffic; when there is room, signal and merge into the main traffic lane.
- Stopping and yielding at all stop signs and driveways, and understanding where to stop in order to see other traffic. Children should be taught to notice the parked cars, trees and bushes and other obstructions.
- Changing lanes safely. Children must be able to look over their shoulders while riding, remain riding in a straight line, and judge how far away and how fast a vehicle is traveling as it overtakes them. First, they should practice riding straight, then learn to look behind them while riding straight, then apply these skills in a traffic situation to learn to judge when to merge. Don't forget signaling.

Encouraging your children to use their bicycles for recreation and transportation is very important in developing their sense of independence. If you monitor their abilities and allow them the freedom appropriate to their skills, it can be very rewarding for them. It will also set the stage for a healthy recreational pastime and an environmentally sound transportation attitude.

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Original publication date: 08/12/1990 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon