



Photo: Bikes Belong

Cycling with Kids

Cycling with kids can be a very rewarding experience. You can get out and enjoy Georgia's great climate with the entire family. It is also an excellent opportunity to teach a child cycling skills that will last a lifetime.

Kids can participate in cycling from a young age. Young children will probably start out in a child's seat or a trailer. Slightly older children will get their start when they graduate from a tricycle to their first bicycle equipped with training wheels.

In a sense, a bicycle is a child's first vehicle. While it only has two wheels, it is wise to always stress the point that a bike is a vehicle, and not a toy, and Georgia traffic

law defines it as such. With the freedom and mobility it offers come many responsibilities, including many important safety considerations.

For parents, being a good role model is a very important step toward teaching children to ride responsibly. Be familiar with safe cycling practices and make a point to ride safely and responsibly yourself. Wear a helmet. Stop at stop signs. Wear bright colored clothing.

Getting started

Young children (ages 1-4) can begin participating in cycling from around 1 year old. Be sure to get an OK from your pediatrician before getting started. Georgia law requires anyone under the age of 16 to wear

a helmet while cycling. This applies to toddlers who are passengers on a bicycle or a trailer as well. Most manufacturers make helmets specifically designed for children of various ages. Check with your local bike shop.

Rear mounted child seats serve as a good way to get started with very small children, but they do raise the bike's center of gravity which will make it handle somewhat differently. Many parents find themselves graduating or going directly to a trailer instead. These allow the child to ride behind the



Photo: Miles McClelland, BRAG

bike rather than on top of it. Newer models will disengage in the event of a crash, reducing the likelihood the trailer will roll over. Overall, the trailer is considered the safer of the two options.



40-6-296 (e)(1) No person under the age of 16 years shall operate or be a passenger on a bicycle on a highway, bicycle path, or sidewalk under the jurisdiction or control of this state or any local political subdivision thereof without wearing a bicycle helmet.

Rides can be an educational opportunity. Talk to a child and point out safety issues as you're riding. Mention that you're slowing to look for oncoming traffic, or stopping for a stop sign. Point out potentially hazardous situations such as cars pulling out of driveways or pedestrians about to step out into the road. Explain in simple terms how these situations could result in a crash. Kids will pick up on these things and learn by your example.

Most preschoolers will not have the coordination to ride by themselves, certainly not without training wheels. However, it is still not too early to get them familiar with various parts of the bike and how they work. Show them the brakes and how to apply them. Teach them to keep hands and feet away from the spokes of a spinning wheel and clear of the chain. If something breaks or is in need of repair, show them the problem and explain why it is important to fix it.

Preschoolers should not ride in the street. Explain that bikes ridden by small children are harder for drivers to see, and use it as a bridge to a lesson on dressing for visibility before going out on a ride. Once they're up and running, let them get some experience on driveways, trails, or sidewalks with close adult supervision. Continue to stress safety issues such as wearing a helmet and visibility.



Photo: Miles McClelland, BRAG

Family affair: a youngster is pulled along on the trail-a-bike behind a tandem, while the older child is in the stoker position behind dad, who is up front.

Older children (ages 5-10)

School age kids can begin to grasp the basics of cycling. They can start to get familiar with shifting and braking, as well as dodging rocks and obstacles. This is a good time to begin introducing general concepts of how cyclists and other road or trail users interact with one another. Stress the importance of always riding on the right and passing on the left. Teach them to make eye contact with other road or trail users and to understand that there is no way to predict where other vehicles are going to go.

Basic concepts of group riding can be introduced, such as not riding too close to others, using hand signals to indicate stops and turns, and giving verbal warnings such as “on your left” when passing other riders.

Stress the concept of riding with traffic rather than against it, and always ride this way to set a good example.

They may be ready to venture onto low traffic streets with adult supervision; however, at this age they still don't have the experience to judge how fast other vehicles are moving or approaching, so use extra caution. When crossing a street or busy intersection, have the child dismount and walk across as a pedestrian. Use the same degree of caution on roads in your neighborhood as you would on a busy thoroughfare with heavier automobile traffic.

They are now old enough to get more familiar with how equipment and accessories work. Show them how to properly put on a helmet, use a bike lock, clean the bike, and inflate the tires.

Children and Early Teens

From the ages of 11-14, kids are getting stronger and now have the physical ability to ride independently. If they have already had some cycling experience, they'll be somewhat familiar with the basics of bike handling and safety. At this age, kids can work on refining and expanding those skills to ride safer and more efficiently.

They are likely to have more interest in bicycle accessories. You can show them how gloves, rear-view mirrors, and different types

of clothing can be useful. How and when to use head and tail lights is important, and also required by law. Cycling computers are inexpensive and will help them to track and understand speed and distance.

If they are regular riders, their bikes can be equipped with some simple tools and a pump for changing a flat. They can also get more involved in maintaining their bikes and learn to make simple adjustments and repairs such as changing or patching a tire.

Bike Trailers vs. Bike Seats

Bike trailers and bike seats each have advantages and disadvantages. A trailer is a more stable way to transport a child over one year-old who has adequate neck strength to maintain head position. A seat loaded with a child raises the bike's center of gravity, making it more top-heavy and prone to tip-over. In addition, some children attempt to see around the adult's body by shifting back and forth in the seat, forcing the adult to unexpectedly adjust balance. However, a child in a bike seat has a better view than a child in a trailer.

Both trailers and seats have five-point harnesses to keep a child firmly restrained, but in the event of a tip-over, the trailer provides a frame to absorb impact. Most bike trailers also have hitches that keep the trailer level in the event that the adult falls. Trailers can tip if turns are taken at high speeds, but the harnessing system in addition to the trailer's external frame help minimize the chances of serious injury.

On top of being heavier, a trailer creates more wind drag, especially if the clear vinyl windshield is rolled up to increase ventilation.

Trailers also tend to be wider than a bike, which can present problems in narrow or confined spaces. Because trailers are more enclosed, they are more conducive for use during cooler or wetter weather, but in summer they can be considerably hotter than a bike seat.

In the end, the choice of either a trailer or a seat depends upon the purpose of travel and the relative riding skills of the parent. Recreational riders who only ride with their children in good weather probably will be content with a seat. Parents who rely on their trailers for transportation may find a trailer more versatile.



Photo: Paul Quick



Photo: Miles McClelland, BRAG

Families with children enjoy the annual Bicycle Ride Across Georgia every summer.

This is also a good time to show them more about positioning themselves safely on a road or trail. Scanning for traffic and other road hazards is a good habit to get them into. Teach them to check behind them before changing lanes or moving out into traffic.

They may want to ride with headphones, but this is hazardous and should not be permitted. It prevents them from being able to hear traffic and warning signs around them.

More kids' cycling resources

Pedestrian and Bicycling Information Center
www.bicyclinginfo.org/ee/ed_child_main.htm



Photo courtesy of Atiba Mbiwan, BRAG

An adult helps a teen rider get familiar with road riding on a recumbent tandem during the Bicycle Ride Across Georgia.

Getting children and teens started in cycling

- **As an adult, always set a good example.** Wear a helmet, stop at traffic lights and stop signs, and ride responsibly.
- **Insist that kids wear helmets at all times.** It will significantly reduce the risk of serious injury and it is the law in Georgia.
- **Make riding with children a learning opportunity.** Point out safety hazards and encourage them to follow the rules of the road.



Photo courtesy of Atiba Mbiwan, BRAG