

Balance Bike Basics:

An overview of the stages and strategies for learning to ride a balance bike for KidsAbility families

Balance bikes are two-wheel bikes without pedals or training wheels. These bikes are propelled when the rider uses their feet to walk, run, or push off the ground to glide. Balance bikes allow the rider to learn the two most difficult skill of riding a bike – how to balance it while going straight, and how to balance it while turning! Since the rider is always able to get their feet to the ground quickly and easily, riding a balance bike is a safe way to learn bike balancing skills and build confidence with the feeling of the bike leaning into the turn.

Balance bikes:



Balance bikes are available in sizes to fit riders as young as 18 months up to adults. 16" and 20" balance bikes are less common, but they are available. We love it when balance bikes have hand brakes as these bikes are safer and allows the rider to learn hand braking skills from the start. Look for a balance bike that has good seat height adjustability, as well as a bike where the handlebars are higher than the seat and with plenty of distance between the seat and the handlebars. Your rider should be positioned upright (not leaning forward) with arms relaxed and reaching forward (almost straight). A longer distance between the wheels allows for better control and a longer stride, and encourages the rider to steer with their whole body rather than their arms. The seat should be positioned so your rider can have their feet flat on the ground with a slight bend to the knees (usually about 2" below the inseam).



Bad fit

- Arms too high
- Elbows very bent
- Riding position cramped



Good Fit

- Arms reaching forward and relaxed
- Longer wheelbase allows room for long stride and better control
- Rider sitting upright and not leaning forward

Turning a two-wheel bike into a balance bike:

Home-modified balance bikes are often heavier than purpose-built ones, but they can also do a great job. If your rider is close to transitioning to two wheels, then one bike can do both jobs! If you are not going to remove the crank, we encourage you to tape the crank to the frame to keep it out of the way. If you suspect your child will require a lot of practice on the balance bike, or if your rider bumps their legs against the crank, we encourage you to remove the crank completely. There are many tutorials online to show you how to do this.



Crank removed from a two-wheel bike



Crank remains and is taped in place

The Stages of Learning to Ride a Balance Bike:

Stage 1: Walking with the bike

During this phase, the rider walks with the bike between their legs. Don't worry, they are still learning a lot by doing this! They are learning that they are responsible for the bike and learning what the bike feels like when it leans, and what it feels like when it is in balance.

Tips for practicing:

- Consider using a training handle to support the bike as your rider is learning this new skill. If you are doing this, make sure to let go as much as possible, and just use the handle to prevent falls. Remember, the goal of this phase is for the rider to learn how to keep the bike in balance themselves!
- Encourage the rider to sit on the seat if they can do so and keep walking. If they stop walking with the bike when they sit, then they are communicating that they need more practice just walking with the bike!
- Keep practice sessions short and positive. Riding the balance bike during this stage is hard work and isn't much fun yet.



Stage 2: Walking with the bike while sitting on the seat

During this stage, the rider can put their weight on the seat while they are walking. This may not be consistent at first, as they will likely stand up when the bike leans too much, rather than correct the lean while they are still sitting. The rider is learning how to use their legs to make the bike roll forward and is now learning what it feels like to sit on a bike that is leaning and what it feels like to sit on a bike that is in balance.

Tips for practicing:

- Try lowering the seat (about 3" below the child's inseam) to encourage staying in a seated position. Raise the seat back up to about 2" below the riders' inseam once they are sitting consistently.
- Some riders may benefit from cueing to stop and correct the bike's lean before continuing.
- Keep practice sessions short and make it fun! Your rider is working hard at this stage and riding still isn't very fun yet. You can motivate your rider by setting goals (Can you make it all the way to the sidewalk? Let's see if you can take 20 steps.) and celebrating when they achieve them. You can also try singing or other games to keep practice times fun and motivating.

Stage 3: Achieving smooth momentum

A rider in this phase of learning will begin to demonstrate the ability to keep the bike rolling smoothly. They will still be walking with the bike (no gliding yet) but they're still doing great! The bike is now rolling smoothly, and they are beginning to be able to hold it in balance for longer periods of time.

Tips for practicing:

- Riding is now beginning to get fun! You can now encourage longer practice sessions and use the bike to go on short family walks, and bike to motivating places like the park. (The rider will likely still want to take breaks, so be prepared to carry the bike, and potentially have a back up like a wagon or stroller if necessary.)
- Find very gentle slopes (no hills yet!). Riding down **very gentle** slopes will allow the rider to maintain some momentum so they can begin to experiment with balancing and lifting their legs.
- If the bike has a handbrake, now is a good time to encourage your rider to begin using it. Feet are for going, hands are for stopping.

Stage 4: Learning to glide

During this stage, the rider can go a little faster, take longer strides, and begin to have moments where both feet are off the ground at the same time.





Tips for practicing:

- Keep using the bike as much as possible for family walks and trips to the park.
- Continue to seek out **very gentle** slopes to encourage momentum and glide
- Try “frog pushes”. Encourage your rider to push off with both feet at the same time to get the bike to roll forward. Start small, and encourage bigger, stronger pushes as they gain confidence. (If your rider tries to jump when you introduce this exercise, encourage them to “push with your legs to make the bike roll.”)

Stage 5: Mastering glide while going straight

A rider in this stage will be able to pick up enough speed to pick both feet up and glide between steps. Their confidence is growing, and their riding is becoming faster and more efficient.

Tips for practicing:

- Try continuous “frog pushes”. Encourage your rider to push off with both feet together three or more times in a row.
- Try “kangaroo pushes” next. Use both feet at the same time to push off with as much strength as possible and glide as long as possible. (Most balance bike riding should be done with walking/running leg patterns, but exercises like this can help to encourage glide and build confidence.)
- Encourage your rider to increase their speed on straightaways (cheetah speed).
- Introduce the challenge of using only one leg to propel the bike while going straight. Make sure they practice with both legs. (This will prepare them for an exercise when they’re in stage 7, and it’s a great way to challenge them to keep improving their balancing skills).
- Keep it fun and exciting. Can your rider think of any other animals to move like? (Big long strides like a giraffe? Fast and small steps like a mouse?) Experimenting with different ways of moving builds confidence with the bike.

*****Special note:** Once your rider is consistently gliding, it may appear that they have mastered the balance bike and are ready to transition to pedals. In fact, they may be able to balance a bike with pedals at this stage... while going straight. It is very important to stick with the balance bike a little longer, so that they can also master steering and balancing through turns before transitioning to pedals.

Stage 6: Learning to glide through turns

Gliding on straightaways is one skill but gliding through a turn requires different balancing skills! A rider in this stage is learning how the bike feels when it leans into a turn and learning how to use their body and their steering together to navigate turns. You may see your rider progress through similar stages as they did while learning to glide while going straight (walking through the turn, achieving smooth momentum, emerging glide, and consistent glide.)





Tips for practicing:

- Encourage turns and circles. Lots and lots of them. In both directions!
- Look for a place to ride that forces your rider to turn a lot. A winding trail, a small parking lot, or other more confined spaces.
- Use chalk to create paths for them to follow (circles and figure 8's are great). You can also use pylons or other markers to have them bike around in circles and figure 8's.
- When starting out, make sure the circles are large enough that your child can maintain continuous, steady momentum. Bigger circles are better at this stage. (If the child is not maintaining steady momentum, their circles may be too small.)

Stage 7: Mastering glide through turns

This is the final stage of mastering the balance bike. When a rider can glide through turns in both directions with confidence, they will be ready for pedals!

- Once your rider is able to demonstrate glide through their turns, challenge them to use only their inside leg to complete circles on the bike. (A rider must lean into the turn to achieve this, therefore this skill ensures that they are comfortable and confident in this position.)
- Encourage your rider to pick up speed, lift their feet, and glide completely through a turn and straighten out again. What letter shapes can they make with their turns? (C? U? S?)
- Encourage continuous turns in both directions, like weaving in and out of four or more cones.

Congratulations! Your rider is now ready for pedals.

Tips for the next steps:

- For some tips on how to launch your rider onto two wheels, see KidsAbility's "Tips and Tools for Transitioning to Two Wheels" handout.
- KidsAbility has several training handles available for loan. This can be a valuable tool to support a safe transition. Contact the Resource Centre for more information.
- If your balance bike rider has never pedaled a bike or trike before, you can introduce them to the motion of pedalling by placing some blocks under the bottom bracket of the bike to lift the back wheel slightly off the ground. Parents should stabilize the bike while the child is exploring the pedalling motion. Check out a video of this method here:

<https://www.twowheelingtots.com/how-to-teach-a-child-to-ride-a-bike/>





Additional biking supports available from KidsAbility:

1. **TR Bike Clinic** - Recreation Therapists run a clinic to support children with special needs in riding a “regular” bicycle or tricycle, or to explore options for enjoying biking together as a family.

At this clinic, the Recreation Therapist can work with you to:

- Identify teaching strategies to learn how to ride a two wheel bike
- Trial bike accessories or modifications that could help your child to ride
- Identify an appropriate bike to best suit your child
- Problem solve specific challenges impacting your child’s bike riding experience
- Identify options available for you to enjoy biking together as a family (trailers, tandems, trail-a-bikes, tow arms, etc.)
- Access equipment in the KidsAbility bike loan program

To access this clinic, contact Intake 519-886-8886 or 1-888-372-2259 ext. 1214 and request the TR Bike Clinic or speak to your KidsAbility Therapist. This clinic available free of charge to all families eligible for KidsAbility’s universal services. www.kidsability.ca/tr-bike-clinic

2. **Adapted Bike Day** - Join KidsAbility’s physiotherapists and adapted bike vendors to explore the variety of specialized bikes and trikes designed specifically for children with special needs. Trial one of KidsAbility’s adapted bikes through our bike loan program, or work with a vendor to purchase the right bike for your child. To access this service, speak with your KidsAbility physiotherapist.

