



Photos by KIM RITZENTHALER/Special Contributor

ARE YOU SURE THIS WON'T HURT? Susan Kasten of Dallas tries to talk son James, 5, into getting back on his bicycle after he took a spill.

Getting the tyke on the bike

Parents share their hard-won expertise on teaching kids to ride

GEARING UP



PAULA LAVIGNE

It's OK to fall. Remember that first bicycle ride without training wheels? It usually involved an anxious parent, a pint-size bike and a white-knuckle grip on the handlebars as you glided away. You probably fell. We all did, but scraped knees and bruised elbows were just part of the experience.

Today's kids are just as resilient, but some parents say luring them into cycling isn't always easy. Maybe their favorite cartoon is on, or they *must* finish just one more level of Super Mario Strikers. Or maybe it's old-fashioned fear.

Despite the resistance, getting kids off the couch and on a bike



THAT'S USING YOUR HEAD: James and big brother Julian (right), 8, buckle up before they mount up.

might be more important now than ever. In Dallas, 16 percent of high school students are overweight, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Cycling can keep kids fit, while giving them some freedom.

The challenge begins with teaching your child to wing it without training wheels. The next hurdle is maintaining that interest through the teen years, when bicycles are banished to a cobweb-covered corner in the garage.

Susan Kasten, a Far North Dallas mom, taught her reluctant 8-year-old son and is now working on his 5-year-old brother. She wants to make cycling a family activity and has tried to get the boys interested by having them follow her on her bike.

Five-year-old James won't ride without training wheels because he fears the "tipping feeling," she says. So she put them back on, but raised them up just enough so he'll still tip a little.

She plans to keep gradually raising them until he won't even know he's actually balancing on only two wheels.

If he falls, well, that's just part of learning.

"Part of being kids ... is to have strawberries on their knees," she says, adding that her 8-year-old, Julian, has fallen a few times. "He's used to the idea. You fall, and you get up." (She stresses that he was wearing a helmet.)

Another mother, Connie Ochoa of Lake Highlands, had a unique method for teaching her son Nathan to ride — but she wishes she had included falling in the lesson plan. She took the training wheels off when Nathan was 6, but helped him balance by putting a large beach towel around his waist and holding both ends as he rode.

Her son seemed to be getting the hang of it, and by the next day was asking whether he could show off his new skill to his friend Joe.

"I once again loaded the bike into the car ... and my son was chattering away about how he was going to show Joe how big he was," she writes in an e-mail. "Just as we were about to drive away, my son says, 'Wait, Mom!



Photos by KIM RITZENTHALER/Special Contributor

IT'S TWO-WHEEL TIME: Susan Kasten takes the training wheels off before son Julian's ride.

You forgot the towel!"

Some parents have been blessed with children who take to cycling as if it were just the next logical step beyond crawling and walking. One of those is 9-year-old Kaylee Fitzgerald of Rowlett. She started cycling at 6, and a year later was asking her parents if she could do long-distance rides.

At a 15-mile race in Sulphur Springs last year, she won the 12-and-under category. Last month, she rode all 100 miles in the Hotter 'N Hell Hundred ride in Wichita Falls.

Cycling's in her heart, she says, and she's already made a list of longer rides she wants to accomplish. Mom and Dad are encouraging, but they're also realistic. Patrick Fitzgerald says his daughter could walk away from cycling tomorrow, and that would be OK.

Children start to lose interest in cycling when they reach middle school, says Robin Stallings, executive director of the Texas Bicycle Coalition. A good way for parents to keep them on two wheels — even when they're dreaming of four — is to continue cycling as a family. He also suggests introducing them to BMX, or motocross, cycling, which includes off-road racing and tricks on ramps and around obstacles.

Because cycling is not among

the major high school or college sports, older kids who want to get into competitive cycling often struggle.

Marcus de la Fuente, a 17-year-old senior at Plano West Senior High School, and his parents battled with the school district to let Marcus get needed athletic credits through an organized cycling program instead of participating in a routine sport such as football.

(His parents say they find it ironic that Lance Armstrong's mother fought with the same school district years ago after Plano East Senior High officials warned that Lance wouldn't

graduate if he skipped school to train.)

Although some teens might look at cycling as a namby-pamby sport where boys shave their legs and wear spandex, Marcus says cycling appealed to him because it's about individual strength, endurance and occasional elbow-throwing.

"It's about as brute as a sport can get, which is what I like about it," he says.

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Rules of the road: All the laws guiding Texas cyclists



BALANCING ACT: Ms. Kasten helps James get rolling.

TRAINING WHEELS OFF

Parents and cycling experts throughout the Dallas-Fort Worth area shared their advice on teaching a child to ride without training wheels. Here are some of their suggestions:

- Take the wheels off and lower the seat to where the child's feet touch the ground. Allow him to push himself and coast until he can balance with his feet off the ground.

- With the training wheels off, start with one pedal in the high, slightly forward position. Have the child put one foot on that pedal, one on the ground, and push off. At the same time, make him focus on something big — such as a house — in the direction he's riding. Tell him not to look at his feet.

- Find a grassy area with a gentle slope. Give your child a little push and let him roll on two wheels with some momentum until the slope levels out. If he falls, he falls on soft ground.

- Raise the training wheels high enough so the child feels safe yet still tips a little and gets used to balancing on two wheels. Keep raising them until the child doesn't need them anymore.

- Hold on to the back of the bicycle seat, helping your child balance a little, and walk along as he starts cycling away. Keep a light touch on the seat to give your child confidence, but let him do the work.

- Get on a bike yourself and start pedaling around. Get older siblings and friends to join you. If you make cycling fun, then the child will see it as a treat and not a chore. See whether your school or city sponsors children's cycling events.

- Cycling safety is also an important part of learning to ride. Make sure your child wears a helmet and knows how to signal and follow traffic rules. (You can find Texas rules at www.biketexas.org under "Resources" and "Rules & Laws.")

- See whether your school offers bike-safety classes. Schools can arrange for bike-safety training through the Texas Bicycle Coalition at 512-476-7433.

Paula Lavigne