

Learn to ride with Professor Balance

1. Prepare equipment

You will need:

- One scooter and a helmet.
- A spanner to remove stabilisers/pedals or adjust saddle height.
- A child's bike.
- A reasonably flat area, away from traffic. Avoid grass if possible.



2. Assess balance

- Let your child scoot around. If they can scoot with both feet up on the scooter and off the ground they can balance and can easily move on to learning to cycle.
- A good game to play is having your child roll a tyre or hula-hoop around so that they see that a wheel stays up when it is moving and falls over when it goes too slow.

3. Negotiate removing stabilisers

- Stabilisers are very special to young children. Try to get their agreement before removing the stabilisers.
- For novice riders having the saddle dropped so that both feet reach the ground is good for boosting confidence, but be ready to raise saddle height as having it too low can hinder pedalling later on.



4. Stopping the bike

- Have the child walk and push the bike – trying the brakes to see that they can control the speed of the bike or stop it without using their feet.
- They can be pushed around too – as long as they get a feel for the brakes. It can help to adjust the reach of the brake lever to help them reach it.



5. Scoot and push

- You could remove the pedals but if they can balance they will very quickly move onto pedalling.
- Have them sit with both feet on the ground – push with both feet at the same time and try to glide, scoot or coast as far as possible with both feet off the ground. A slight slope can help with gliding.

6. Supporting

- To get your child really moving, support them on the bike with:
a) LEFT HAND – palm open on the end of left handlebar – not holding! b) RIGHT HAND – pushing between shoulder blades. Now push child forward – you will sense when they are balancing and when you are still supporting them.

- If they are balancing initially remove LEFT HAND (to scratch your nose is a good excuse) and then with RIGHT HAND use fewer fingers to push.

- If you remove your support all together and the child comes to a halt because you have stopped holding them – explain that they were doing all the work because you were only using one finger and it is impossible to hold them up with just one finger!

- If they appear to be looking down at the bike, encourage them to “look where you are going,” rather than look up.



Things to keep in mind

- Generally parents get their children to pedal, then balance and finally shout to them to use their brakes; the Professor Balance process is the other way about!

- *Avoid teaching on grass:* Any advantage from softer falls will be more than outweighed by the greater number of falls caused by the grass slowing down the rider. You also need a reasonable speed to help maintain balance. Children fall on tarmac playgrounds every day at school, remember it is all part of growing up.



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- *A word of warning:*

Sometimes young children aren't in the mood to learn so be prepared to break up learning to cycle with other activities nearby.

Take a break and play on the swings before returning to the bike. Most importantly, remember to be patient and calm. This is sometimes easier to say than do but well worth the effort!

7. Pedal up!



Ironically this last part can be the hardest thing for children to master and the most frustrating thing for parents to watch.

- **Challenge 1:**

Children will tend to naturally pedal off with their left foot – cycle training they receive in P6 and P7 will explain why in the UK it is important to use your right foot, but for the moment let them use the foot they prefer.

As adults, flicking a pedal up with the toe of our foot is quick and easy – for the novice rider it can be surprisingly difficult. Be patient and let them learn how to get the pedal into the classic 2 o'clock position.

Don't get bogged down at this stage – the child needs to get as much distance under their wheels as quickly as possible.

To help you could stand in front of their bicycle, get them to put their feet on the pedals and push the bicycle backwards to get the foot in the correct position.

When you describe where the pedal should be it is not UP from their point of view, looking down, but rather it is forward!



- **Challenge 2:**

Another challenge can be lifting the second foot onto the pedal.

To let them practise this, stand in front of the bicycle holding the handlebars, ask them to put one foot on a pedal and close their eyes.

Roll the bicycle backwards so the 'empty' pedal moves position and ask them to put their foot on the pedal without opening their eyes, a few attempts should be enough for them to learn themselves that they don't need to look down.

- Now that the child is cycling the inevitable will happen: they will crash and fall off. Avoid reacting to this in any way other than expressing concern for the bike!

Parents will find this difficult but be sensible; it could be a sore one. But equally most children get up and straight back on.

If you are using this technique with older children, remember that falls have more potential to hurt given the higher speeds involved and greater weight of the child.



Professor Balance Vocabulary

What has happened?

You think...

You say...

- Child falls in a blur of arms, legs and handlebars.

Oh no!

“Get up and check the bike”

- Child rolls about one metre and stops.

Will they ever learn?

“Great! You are nearly getting there – that was a whole three foot!! Yeaah!!!”

- Child says “You stopped holding me up!”

How did they realise that?

“I don’t need to hold you any more.”

- Child looks at the ground instead of looking where they are going.

Why are they not interested in looking ahead?

“Looking at the ground is boring – look at the lovely things all around you.”

- You want the child to put their foot on a pedal at two o’clock position.

Good grief – how can you not do this?

“Put your foot on the pedal that is at the front.”