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# BORN TO RIDE

BY LAURA BRUNER

Parents use an old invention to fill the gap between training wheels and the freedom of two wheels.

Learning to ride a bike is an important rite of passage for a child, but it can be a challenging process for both the child and the parent.

Children often move from tricycles to bicycles with training wheels and then make the big jump to a bike without training wheels. The distance between the last two stages is great, and many parents approach it with understandable trepidation and hesitation, as many remember the first time a parent's hand left the seat of their bike and they promptly lost their balance and crashed.

Balance bikes—an old concept with a new application—are now making the transition much easier and safer.

## The Missing Link?

A balance bike only differs from a standard bike in a few ways. It has two wheels but no pedals, stabilizers or brakes, allowing the child to focus on balance, stability and steering.

Interestingly enough, the first balance bike came before the common bicycle we know today. Originally called the laufmaschine (“running machine”), the balance bike saw its inaugural ride in 1817 with creator German inventor Karl Drais at the handles. The original balance bike, nicknamed the dandy horse, was also known as the draisine or draisienne. Cranks and pedals—the hallmarks of the modern bike—appeared decades later. The 19th-century invention is now making a comeback to bridge the gap between training wheels and standard bike.

On a balance bike, children propel themselves along by pushing off of the ground with their feet. Doing so has a few perks: Children begin to improve their strength and cardiovascular fitness just by pushing themselves along. Additionally, no greasy chains or funky wheels will catch clothing, and repairs and maintenance are minimal with very few moving parts.

Absent training wheels, the bike forces the rider to keep it upright. Because the child's feet can always touch the ground, he or she safely learns to balance, knowing a foot can easily reach the ground to prevent a fall.

Training wheels work to some extent but remove the balance training, making the transition harder. Once the wheels are removed, children have to find balance, but now there's more speed involved and falls can be unpleasant.

A balance bike allows a child to prevent a fall simply by putting a foot on the ground.





Tamaryn Barber's child has been using a balance bike since before the age of 2.

"We tried training wheels, but they were a failure," said Ron Renwick, father of two young girls. "Training wheels created a secondary support that my girls quickly started relying on. They had fun riding with training wheels, but they could not transition to riding without them."

The balance bike takes children out of their comfort zone in the safest manner, allowing them to find their balance on a bike before they have to worry about pedaling. Similarly, the absence of brakes simplifies things further. The child only has to focus on balance and steering. Once those aspects are mastered, pedaling and braking can easily be learned on a standard bike.

Erika Conley, mother of two, explained how easy the transition was for her kids: "The transition to the regular bike with pedals was seamless. I put them each on 12-inch bikes when they had just turned 4, and they were able to pedal and balance with just a little help starting off."

Former CrossFit Games competitor Tamaryn Barber is mother to a young balance-bike rider.

"It gave him the confidence to be on a bike before he was 2 years old," she said.

Though the importance of balance, coordination and strength shouldn't be overlooked, kids also build confidence and self-esteem on balance bikes. Bloody knees and elbows can cause children to fear bikes, and the more gradual learning curve removes frustration from failed attempts to balance on a standard bike.

"Riding a bike takes faith. You need to go fast enough to keep the bike upright when you are afraid to go at any speed, so it takes a lot of faith and creates confidence when it happens," Renwick said.

The confidence and skill earned on the balance bike can then be used in other endeavors.

"My kids are both pretty coordinated now at 6 years old. I never thought about the balance bike contributing to that, but I guess it could be a factor," Conley said. While she rides with her kids

to and from school every day, most of her children’s friends still use training wheels—something her little ones never needed.

Balance bikes range in price from about US\$60 to \$150, but Renwick recommends a more practical approach: “Instead of buying an expensive balance bike, I pulled the cranks and bottom bracket off of an inexpensive little kid’s bike. When they were ready to move up, I reinstalled the parts and we had a pedal bike.”

Safety, fitness and economy aside, perhaps the best part is that the balance bike tires kids out.

“They definitely got worn out after a while. It was a great way to burn off extra energy in the evenings,” Conley said.

Sounds like a win-win. ■

### About the Author

Laura Bruner works for CrossFit Inc. on the Certifications Team. She’s also an educator and has helped in the initiative to bring CrossFit and education together through her interaction with schools, teachers, administrators and affiliates.



With increasing levels of confidence and fitness, children will soon be able to leave parents behind as they move on to standard bicycles.