

Bicycle Safety Education for Kids

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When asked to conduct some sort of bicycle safety education for children, the first thing that comes to the minds of most bike cops and EMS cyclists is the bike rodeo. Spring is the perfect time for bike rodeos – temperatures are getting warmer, kids and teachers both have spring fever, and the long, lazy days of summer are just around the corner. Many children will spend those precious vacation days roaming their neighborhoods on bikes. As public safety professionals – and cyclists – it is our responsibility to help keep them safe while still having fun. The purpose of this article is to provide information that will help you if you get called upon to organize a bike rodeo to educate the kids in your community.

GETTING STARTED

The first and most important thing to remember is that the easiest way to influence people, especially kids, is to “practice what we preach.” If you do something dumb like ride without a helmet, ride on the wrong side of the road, or blow a stop sign when you don’t have to, you can bet some kids will be watching. They’ll remember just how seriously you take the subject of bike safety and most – if not all – of your credibility will go down the tubes.

The second most important thing to realize is that you should take advantage of existing programs, borrow everything applicable to your target audience, and give credit where credit is due. Check with the League of American Bicyclists’ for Instructors that have Kids’ Enhancement training. Contact your state Department of Transportation and request any materials they offer. A search of the Internet will yield numerous resources related to Bike Rodeos, Bike Safety, Bike Education, Helmets, Kid’s Safety, Injury Prevention for Children, etc. Most of these agencies, companies, and individuals are more than happy to see their programs put to use. I just sent for classroom and outdoor rodeo packets from Modern Woodmen of America. Safety books, outlines, diagrams, certificates, written and skills tests, decals and reflectors for 950 kids... for free!

Last year I used a packet from the Bike Helmet Safety Institute, called the *Take Home Ride Safe Bike Rodeo*. It contains five short lessons for kids to do with their parents. I used them to “prep” all of our fourth graders for our “We get to ride our bikes during school?” rodeos.

As you customize your program, keep in mind this very important statement: Kids are *not* small adults. They differ from adults in many ways.

- They have physical limitations: they can’t see over or around things as easily.
- They have 1/3 less peripheral vision.
- They have a poorly developed “sense of danger.”
- They can’t tell from which direction sound is coming.
- They have trouble judging speed and distance, so they can’t tell how quickly a car is approaching.
- They have a more limited attention span.
- They can’t “multi-task” as well, meaning they may be able to balance, or watch where they are going, or ride in a straight line, or signal a turn, or talk to a friend, but they can’t do more than two or so at the same time.

WHAT’S THE PURPOSE?

The main purpose of bike safety education for kids is to minimize crashes and injuries. In order to do that, you have to know what the most common causes of crashes involving children, and you need to learn which teaching methods are the most successful. The most frequent mistakes kids make are:

- “Mid-block ride-outs” – failing to stop and look for traffic while entering the street from driveways;
- Failing to stop for stop signs and traffic signals;
- Making unexpected turns and swerving;
- Riding on the wrong side of the road.

Once you know the common mistakes, it is essential to learn what to teach and when. Like those of many departments, our rodeos used to consist of a small chalked course with a stop sign, a one-way street, and a left turn arrow. Officer Friendly would walk a child through in about three minutes, having the child (often on a “big wheel”) do hand signals (kind of), stop at the stop sign, etc. At the end of the course, the child

would get a water bottle or a Frisbee. It was a positive contact between the kids and the officer, but it did not accomplish much in the way of education.

The best way to teach younger kids is through training the parents to teach basic balance and coordination, and by making sure everyone wears helmets. Younger children should ride with their parents, who should continually coach them. This is important because the kids will not remember what they are supposed to do, and they should not attempt to do things like signal or pretend they are riding in the road.

One of the hardest parts is to get the parents to understand that if the child cannot stand over a bike, it is too big and cannot be ridden safely. We all loved to ride our older brother or sister's bike, *but the safest way to stop is not to jump off the bike*. The other challenge is convincing a parent of the importance of proper equipment, properly maintained. It is amazing what some kids are riding! If a car can't turn or stop without proper air pressure in the tires, how can a bike? How can a child steer around a pothole if the handlebars aren't tight enough to turn the wheel? Several times I've had two brothers on bikes – one bike with brakes on the front and one bike with brakes on the back. A bike without brakes? How about a bike with **no seat**, or with a piece of vinyl or cloth over the seat post? Or the kids who ride with dad's motorcycle helmet on, head bobbing away?

Would their parents be as negligent with their cars? Some would, but thankfully most aren't. They realize that a car without brakes could kill someone, but they don't see the irony in allowing their kids to ride around cars, buses, and other traffic on bikes with bad brakes, flat tires and spinning handlebars.

THE BICYCLE RODEO

At around age ten, most kids have developed the mental and physical capacity to learn the skills necessary for riding in traffic, so our training focuses on those specific skills. Rather than telling parents that their kids will be safe riding in the road after they have completed the course, we stress that the kids will learn the necessary skills, and that when they use those skills all of the time, they will be safer on the road.

We teach the children to:

- Ride in a straight line using 3-foot lanes.
- Check back over the shoulder for traffic, while riding in the 3-foot lane.
- Avoid small objects without swerving out into traffic, the "rock dodge."
- Stop or turn quickly if necessary to avoid traffic, the "max brake."
- Look "left – right – left" for traffic before entering the road.
- Position themselves on the road.

We also stress the following rules of safe cycling:

- Be Visible.
- Be Predictable.
- Follow the Rules of the Road.
- Communicate with Other Drivers.
- Don't Ride after Dark.

That's a lot to teach, too much for any one person. Get help – teachers, parents, other bike cops, bike shop volunteers, Police Reserves, Police Explorers. Set up check-in stations. While someone checks tires, brakes, and handlebars, someone else fits helmets. Go to your local community for support. Our hospital donates surgical caps to be worn under the "loaner" helmets, which were donated by our "Safe Kids" organization. Visit your property room. We use 20-30 "recovered" bikes from our property room that were "safety-checked" by our local bike shop, which is owned by League of American Bicyclists' president Chris Kegel.

READY TO RIDE

After everyone is registered, safety-checked, and fitted with a helmet, we are ready to ride. We take groups through each station, starting with three sets of 3-foot lanes. (Use spray marking chalk with an extended "paintstick" handle; it fades more quickly. I used to use engineering marking paint guaranteed to fade away in 4-6 weeks, or months, or 2 years!) Each child goes through each station 3-4 times, until he or she is comfortable with the skill being practiced.

First, they practice riding straight in the lanes, riding with one hand on the bars, then doing shoulder checks while staying in the lanes. In the second set of lanes, they practice max braking and "slow racing," keeping their hands on the bars, their feet on the pedals, and staying in their lanes – while they balance and ride as slowly as they can. In the third set of lanes, we set up a rock dodge using tennis balls or sponges (wet, so they don't blow around.)

The next set of skill practice involves turning and bike handling. For these exercises, we make several sets of two or three circles. (Using the paintstick and chalk, and something heavy with a string tied to it, I make a 10' inner circle and a 12' outer circle. The outer circles should touch, forming a "figure eight-and-a-half.") The kids practice riding while keeping the front tires between the two circles. Then one of the instructors leads 4-5 kids through the "8." When the riders intersect each other, the first person arriving goes first, but must communicate to the other rider, e.g., "you go first" or "I'm going first." When this exercise is done correctly, all riders should be able to "time," communicate, and balance so that no-one touches a foot to the ground.

For tighter turns and balance, we form an "M" with a 3' riding lane and a 4' space between the lanes, similar to the lock-to-lock drill. Then the kids go through a serpentine made of three rows of seven cones, spaced about 8' apart. Arrows are chalked around the cones to keep the kids going in the correct direction.

We usually set up a "lock-to-lock" and a partial "off-set serpentine" using 14 cones for the more capable kids. Then we'll lead a group through the whole course.

A side street is blocked off for the final portion of the rodeo. We set up stop signs and have the kids practice looking L-R-L from the stop, or, if the street is busy, moving onto the sidewalk and crossing like a pedestrian. They'll practice passing several parked cars, doing a shoulder check to move out into the lane, and riding straight – a door's length away – without swerving to the curb between the parked cars.

If time permits, a video station may be added. "Safe Kids" has an excellent one called *Someone Else*, which makes parents very uncomfortable but is just about right to convince 10-year-olds to wear helmets. *A Kid's Eye View* from the Wisconsin D.O.T. is used nationally for educating parents, and is an excellent addition to the rodeo if you are able to run a video station for parents while their kids go through the course.

At the end of the rodeo, the kids enjoy lemonade or orange drink and "snack-paks" from McDonalds, and are awarded certificates of completion. For the last several years, we also gave out either headlights or taillights.

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

Last year, I presented the type of rodeo described above to 4th graders at 20 primary schools – two hours each, twice a day, for 10 school days. That's 950 kids. In addition, I conducted another 16 or so rodeos for area recreation departments and other organizations. Although the basic formula is the same, each rodeo is somewhat unique. There are plenty of resources out there, but in selecting the ones you will use, it is essential to remember your target audience. Even after having conducted so many rodeos, I am always looking to "borrow" ideas to make them more fun and challenging, both for the kids and for the adults.

Remember to plan ahead and leave nothing to chance. The more volunteers you recruit and helpers you prepare, the more you can do. Prepare brief written instructions for your helpers on how to fit helmets and what to do at each of the stations. Training several people who are able to participate in each event will help tremendously. Make sure you have at least two electric pumps.

One other bit of advice. If you're starting a new program, check with your local hospital and start keeping statistics on emergency room visits for kids injured in bike crashes. You'll need to document the statistics for several years, but hopefully in time you will obtain the hard numbers you need to justify your program and the time invested.

For more information and advice on running a bike rodeo, contact Cpl. Tom Sipin of the West Allis P.D. at tsipin@ci.west-allis.wi.us.

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