

Buying your kid's FIRST BIKE

See something wrong with this picture? * Read on for tips on how to get the *right* fit for your child

by TRISH SNYDER
with files from ANDREW MAEMURA

BELL

Riding without a horn or bell will get you a fine in some provinces, such as BC and Ontario.

BRAKES

Single-speed bikes have a coaster or pedal brake. Opt for a model that also adds a front or rear handbrake sized for a child's hand: This gives kids the comfort of the coaster brake with the experience of proper handbraking. A linear pull brake (a.k.a. V-brake, for its vise-like grip) is easier for kids to pull and stronger than a caliper or side-pull brake (which looks like a horseshoe).

FRAME

Aluminum is lighter than steel. "And if you're going to be handing bikes down, it's less likely to rust," says Andrew Maemura, service manager at Cycle Solutions in Toronto.

Other options

Suspension Looks cool, but unnecessary; shocks are best for nine- to 12-year-olds who'll be bumping along mountain-bike trails.

Shifters Twist-style gearshifting is more popular on kids' bikes, though trigger shifting is preferable so the child doesn't have to adjust her hand position.

Gears Not strictly necessary for most five- or six-year-olds, but gears make hills bearable for little legs.



HEADS UP!

Get the facts on bike helmets on p. 86.

Look, Mom, no pedals!

Training wheels may become extinct if the newest toddler trend catches on. Run bikes, or push bikes, introduce little kids to an essential bike skill — balance — by eliminating pedals, gears or brakes. Toddler Sam Cockburn took to the bike immediately when his dad, Heath, store manager for Toronto bike shop La Bicicletta, sat him on a wood-frame Likeabike (metal bikes are also available). "He figured out that if he lifted his feet he could coast, and he put his feet down to stop and learned how to lean into corners." Cockburn plans to remove the pedals from a "real" bike when Sam is 3½, so he can start to tackle handbraking. Eventually, he'll re-install the pedals. Says Cockburn: "The push bike is great because it allows you to skip training wheels."



*SEAT

Better bikes have a child-sized saddle. And did you notice what's wrong here? When seated, new riders should be able to comfortably touch the ground with both feet so they can stop safely (unlike our little guy). Raise the seat in small increments as the child grows more confident, ensuring he can touch on tiptoe.

CHAIN

A chain guard keeps pants from getting caught. On bikes without a chain guard, roll up the right pant leg or wrap with a reflective Velcro strap.

REFLECTORS

Reflectors are important to keep riders visible day and night, but lights are essential if you're riding near dusk or after dark. Low-voltage LED lights have replaceable batteries, and most can be installed or removed without tools.

TRAINING WHEELS

Install training wheels tightly, but position them so the bike wobbles slightly from side to side; this way, kids get used to balancing while in motion. An additional metal bracket prevents training wheels from buckling.

PHOTO: SUSAN ASHUKIAN, BIKE & HELMET, CYCLE SOLUTIONS, TORONTO