



---

## What Every Parent Should Know

---

April, 1994

Bicycling is fun for kids, and a big step in growing up. Having their own transportation gives them mobility and a taste of independence. But, without proper training, kids can get into serious trouble on a bicycle. This bulletin will help you teach your child the attitudes and skills that will help make him or her a safer rider now and for years to come.

Be sure your child rides a bike that fits, one which he or she can straddle with both feet flat on the ground. A larger bike to “grow into” is hard for them to control. Stick with a bike having a coaster brake (the kind that brakes when you pedal backwards), unless your child’s hands are large and strong enough to operate handbrake levers.

Your child should wear a helmet. Children between the ages of one and 13 are required by law in New York State to wear a helmet. Bicycle accidents are a major cause of head injuries in children. Hardshell bicycle helmets save lives. Three out of four bicyclists killed in crashes die of head injuries, and thousands suffer permanent brain damage. Most of these deaths and serious injuries could be prevented by hardshell helmet use. Helmets are stylish and come in all sizes. Most bike shops can fit your child (and you, to set a good example) with a comfortable helmet. Purchase a helmet that meets Snell Memorial Foundation or American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standards. Forget the others.

There is no magic age at which a child can safely ride a bike. Younger children should ride under direct adult supervision, even when on sidewalks. Sidewalks have hazards, too. Drivers of cars entering and leaving driveways

may not look for bikes, so bicyclists must look for and stop for cars crossing sidewalks. It can be said that before the age of ten, few children can really understand traffic. They can be taught certain specific skills, but they will have trouble judging vehicle speeds and understanding concepts like “right-of-way.”

Help them to understand that a bicycle is a vehicle and not a toy. Teach them how to start and stop a bicycle, and what to look for like loose chains and nuts, broken spokes, etc.

Spend time with your children. Show them that you care about their bicycling habits. Take them out for training rides. Here are some suggestions on what you can do:

### **Sidewalks, Driveways, etc.**

Stop before entering a street from a sidewalk, driveway, parking lot, alley, curb, or anyplace. About half of the children eight and under who get killed on bikes get hit when they ride out of a driveway without stopping or looking when they enter a road. *What you can do:* Explain the reason for stopping before entering a street. Take your child to the driveway and practice stopping, moving out to see around objects, scanning left-right-left, and if there’s no traffic, proceed into the road.

### **Playing**

No playing in the road. *What you can do:* Help your child identify other places such as parks or playgrounds where he or she can ride figure eights, and otherwise zoom around without having to worry about cars. Explain that the street is for safe riding practices only.

## ***As they get older:***

### **Drive With Traffic**

Driving against traffic puts bicyclists where motorists least expect them and directly causes one out of five bike/car crashes (Motorists turning right look for traffic coming from the left, not from the right). People drive cars drive by habit. *What you can do:* Stand on the sidewalk with your child at a busy intersection and watch which way drivers turn their heads.

### **Stop Signs and Signals**

Stop at all stop signs and red lights. Bicyclists breaking this basic rule cause about 30% of serious bike/car crashes for this age group. *What you can do:* Explain the reasons for traffic signs and signals, and that traffic works as well as it does because most people know and follow the rules. Practice identifying different traffic signs. Close your eyes and listen for approaching “quiet” cars. Practice stopping and looking before entering an intersection and waiting for others who may not have yielded the right-of-way.

### **Traffic**

Watch out for traffic and be predictable when travelling in traffic. Cyclists who make unexpected left turns without scanning behind for traffic and signalling their turns account for 30% of serious car/bike mishaps for young children. The key here is to look to the rear to see cars coming from behind. Children often forget about cars they can't see, think cars can stop faster than they really can, or assume adults will “look out for them.” Bicyclists travelling around parked cars should also scan behind and yield to overtaking traffic. *What you can do:* Teach your child to walk across busy streets until he or she has more experience

and understands traffic. In the meantime, for residential street riding, your child can learn to always scan and signal before left turns. To teach scanning behind without swerving, take your child to a playground to practice riding a straight painted line while quickly looking behind. Stand alongside and hold up two or three fingers after your child rides by. Without swerving, have him or her practice telling you how many fingers you are holding up.

### **Decisions**

Make your own decisions. Many accidents happen when youngsters follow each other. The first may run a stop sign and get through, but others may not be as lucky. *What you can do:* Impress upon your child the importance of checking traffic for him or herself. Each cyclist in a group should stop for stop signs, and scan behind (and yield to overtaking and oncoming traffic) before making left turns.

### **Busy Streets**

No riding in busy streets. Children haven't built up their traffic cycling skills to handle heavy traffic situations. *What you can do:* Let your child know that certain streets are “off-limits” and that riding on them is a privilege that will come when it is earned.

### **Night Riding**

No night riding. Older cyclists, with the proper equipment and cycling skills, can do it in reasonable safety, but it's 20 times as risky as day riding, and it's not for kids. *What you can do:* Rule out night riding entirely. If your child is stuck somewhere after dark, be sure he or she knows to call you, collect from a pay phone if necessary, for a ride home.