



FREEDOM WHEELS

Bikes and Trikes for Tykes



By Tina Dealwis

Ask 10-year-old Wesley Magee-Saxton to name his favourite activity and he'll shout "bike riding." It makes him feel like he's walking, he explains. Wesley has cerebral palsy and says his life was quite different before he started bike riding.

Wesley uses a walker for short distances and his wheelchair for longer ones, but neither was suitable for getting to his friend's house. But his bike is, and now the two boys enjoy doing laps around the neighborhood and going for ice cream at the local Dairy Queen. "I wasn't as active before. I didn't see my friend as much and I got bored," he shares. "Bike riding has made me a lot more active and a lot happier."

Perhaps no activity is as inclusive and freeing as bike riding. A universal activity that transcends age and busts past social barriers, biking provides freedom, independence, and the exhilaration of physical exercise. For many kids with disabilities, it's a gateway to independence.

The benefits of bike riding are plentiful – physical, emotional, psychological and social benefits, not to mention old-fashioned great fun. Physically, bicycling is a great cardio workout and can improve posture and breathing, says Ken Vanstraelen, president and founder of Freedom Concepts, a Winnipeg-based adapted bike manufacturer. "The bike is a starting point of a true rehab program," he maintains. Blythe Dalziel, a physiotherapist at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehab in Toronto, adds the benefit of balance to the payback list which includes "improving leg strength and reciprocal movement, coordination and endurance." But the list doesn't stop there. "Bike riding can improve range of motion as well," promotes physiotherapist Jennifer Ryan, who works with Dalziel at Bloorview. "A lot of kids who use a wheelchair might also have weak arms. But on the bike, they can move, and improve their arms much more quickly."

Adapted bikes are sometimes used as part of a special needs child's daily physical activity requirements at school.

"When the school uses that bike, kids crowd around because the child with a disability has something so unique," Vanstraelen observes. "The able-bodied kids can't ride a bike at school. Now he or she is in the spotlight."

Wesley's mother, Jan Magee, agrees. "It's harder to do outdoor activities. He can't run around a baseball diamond, but he can be out riding his bike. He feels totally independent, and from an emotional standpoint, that makes him feel really good." For Pasquale D'Amico, whose son Christian has autism, bike riding helps his son and other kids who don't communicate verbally be able to fit in with other kids. "He sees other kids riding, and he can do it too," enthuses D'Amico. "It gives him a sense of pride, and social interaction even though he can't verbally communicate."

Biking is an activity that kids can do with their friends and family. It's inclusive and a great social forum. "Biking is a huge social skill," notes Laura Hunter, whose Xceptional Biking program teaches bike riding to kids with and without disabilities. "Every kid in the neighbourhood bikes," she generalizes. "It provides self-confidence and independence." Self-esteem and confidence are huge benefits of bicycling. "It's that normalcy, the ability to do something that all of their friends can do," says Vanstraelen. He recalls a boy in Bakersfield, California, who was never expected to walk, let alone ride a bike. "We sat him on one of our adapted bikes. Within the first three revolutions, I could tell that this kid was determined to ride," Vanstraelen recounts. "Within 10 minutes, he was pedalling forwards. His three brothers cheered him on. That's the power of the bike."

Not only are bikes great for children, they also provide benefits for the parents. Wesley's dad Paul Saxton affirms that his son's new bike has made their lives much easier too. Rather than having to push Wesley and provide constant assistance, his parents can be standing at the curb

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just watching and enjoying their son's new-found freedom... having fun and fitting in.

There are many options for adapting a bike to a child's unique needs. One of the most common is the addition of foot plates which help keep feet in place. Special seats and large training wheels can also be added to traditional bikes. Parents also have the option of purchasing a recumbent bike, or "trike", a three-wheeler which can be adapted to individual needs. Wesley started with a regular bike that was modified with some adaptations. Finding it difficult to enjoy, he opted for a recumbent bike. His three-wheeler gives him a much better riding experience. Christian rides a regular bicycle without any modifications.

Wesley's parents spent \$1,000 on his bike, but some can cost up to \$6,000, depending on a child's needs. Wesley's parents consider it money well spent, but the financial cost of adapted bicycles can be a big challenge for some parents. There are however, avenues for funding and financial assistance which require time and patience. "Once parents are focused on exploring bike riding options for their child, we have a lot of tools to help," offers Vanstraelen. "If there's a will, there's a way." To try before you buy, Bloorview created an Equipment Lending Program that allows parents and children to test-drive different bikes to determine what suits them best. Kids can borrow a bike for a couple of weeks,

and try it out at home. Bloorview also helps parents source a bike for purchase.

Hunter says it's important to start kids out on a bike that is simple and fun to use, so that the child will feel motivated to continue. "Motivation is important – we start kids off by getting them motivated and excited about biking." Fear is another factor. "A lot of kids are really afraid," Hunter acknowledges, and stresses the importance of helping kids learn the fundamentals of bike riding to help them overcome that anxiety. She says patience is also important for everyone when a child is learning to ride a bike. "Often the bike they start out with isn't the bike they end up with. Work them up to a different bike. Go at a gradual pace and advance in small increments. It builds confidence." Wesley admits that he was very afraid when he first tried bike riding. He advises other kids to just get on the bike and try. "Just get on, wear your helmet, pretend you're not going to fall. Take it slowly, and as you get better, you get used to it," he sagely suggests.

"Moving through space on your own power is a joy," expresses David Kron, a representative of Freedom Concepts. "It's fun, social and exhilarating for kids, and affords them a sense of belonging. It's a great equalizer," he adds. "Every kid should ride a bike. It's a rite of passage." And as Wesley describes: "It makes my legs feel like I'm actually walking."

Buddy Bike An alternative to tandem cycling, tag-a-longs, trikes and infant seats, the Buddy Bike is a tandem bicycle (bicycle for two) that places the smaller rider in the front seat while the rear rider controls the steering. It's shorter in length than a standard tandem, has a unique handlebar setup and a lower front seat so both riders can safely enjoy the view – a great adaptive outdoor recreation and therapeutic activity for those who may not otherwise be able to experience the thrill of riding a bicycle.

The Buddy Bike can be empowering for a child or adult with special needs. The front rider contributes to pedaling and propelling the bicycle forward but doesn't steer. Buddy Bike riders say that they feel like they fit in by being able to do what other kids do, and they can keep up with family and friends.

Riders must be able to sit upright on a standard bicycle seat to ride the Buddy Bike. Fold-out foot pegs are available for smaller riders to keep their feet out of the way of moving pedals. The Buddy Bike can support up to 380 pounds, making it the ultimate family bike that can be enjoyed by riders of all ages and abilities. **For more information visit www.buddybike.com.**



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