

Keeping Kids Safe on Bikes, Trikes, Skateboards—and in Cars

“Safety is not a gadget, but a state of mind.”—Eleanor Everet, safety expert

When the weather gets nice, kids head outside and jump on their trikes, bikes, or skateboards, or hop into the car. While it’s great for kids to be mobile and get some exercise, it can be stressful for parents who worry about their kids’ safety. Consider these ideas to keep your kids safe while allowing them to have some fun

- Talk concretely about safety with your child. Instead of saying, “Be safe,” give explicit instructions on what your child should do. For example, if you have sidewalks, have your child ride only on the sidewalks in front of your home and not cross any streets. Be aware that some communities now say that sidewalks are for pedestrians only, so if that’s the case, you’ll need to find an alternative other than the street for young children to ride their trikes and bikes.
- Don’t rely on cell phones as a safety measure. Yes, a cell phone might help, but it’s not a safety sure-all since the batteries could go dead, your child could drop it, or your child could get injured enough and not be able to use it.
- Always insist that your child wear a helmet when riding a trike, bike, or skateboard. Make sure bike helmets have the CPSC sticker and that the skateboard helmets have the ASTM F 1492 sticker.
- Visit your community’s park and recreation department and inquire about bike paths, skateboard parks, and other recreational areas where you and your child can bike together.
- Insist that everyone always wear seat belts when riding in a car and that children are in the correct child or booster seat required for their age and weight.
- Remember that *how* you drive is a powerful lesson to your kids. Make sure you make full stops at stop signs. Don’t race through yellow lights. Signal before turning or changing lanes. Be aware of any inclination you may have toward road rage and do all you can to avoid it. All these are habits you want your kids to emulate once they begin driving, so do them yourself and talk about what you’re doing.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- When your child is riding a trike or bike outside, always keep a close eye on your child. Your child is too young to be able to make all safety decisions.
- Have races with your young child. As your child rides a trike, race your child while jogging alongside him or her. Let your child win most of the time. It will be great exercise for both of you.
- Once your child is coordinated enough, move him or her to a small bicycle with training wheels. As your child gradually gets a sense of balance with the training wheels, readjust the wheels so that your child has to work a bit harder at balancing.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Even after your child learns to ride a bicycle without training wheels, there are still a lot of bicycle skills she or he will need to master. For example, riding down hills is dangerous for most children since they often don't know how to stop a bike and keep their balance while going at high speeds.
- Make bike riding more fun by having your child decorate his or her bike with crepe paper in the spokes—or by using clothespins to attach individual playing cards to the spokes for sound effects.
- When riding on bike trails together, make sure your child stays to the right to avoid head-on collisions with cyclists coming from the opposite direction.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- As children enter puberty, they often resist wearing helmets. Some even will wear their helmets while a parent is looking and then hide it in the bushes once they're a block away. As best you can, make sure your child is always wearing a helmet.
- Some preteens find bike helmets “uncool” and refuse to wear them. Help them find a more stylish skateboard helmet that also has the CPSC bike sticker. Many prefer skateboard helmets when riding bikes at this age.
- If your child has a cell phone, be clear that riding a bike (or a skateboard) while talking on a cell phone (or attempting to text message) is dangerous and should not be done.
- Be clear about what kids need to look for in crossing roads and railroad tracks. Many kids get into fender benders with cars when drivers turn a corner and don't see the kids on the bike. Tell your kids to make eye contact with drivers to ensure that the drivers see them.
- Some states allow 15-year-olds to get learner's driving permits. You have the right to decide whether your teen is ready for this at this age—or not. When you do decide your child is ready to begin learning driving skills, teach him or her carefully yourself and enroll your child in a comprehensive driving course.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Make sure teenagers always wear seatbelts when riding in or driving a car. Watch for teens who secure the seatbelt and sit on it instead of wearing it.
- Be clear on what you expect when your teenager drives (or rides in a car with a teenage driver). The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry has helpful tips at http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/helping_your_teen_become_a_safe_driver.
- Be clear that getting a driver's license is a privilege, not a right. As a parent, you have the final say whether your teen is ready to get a license—or not. According

to the Federal Highway Administration, only 30 percent of 16-year-olds get a driver's license. That compares to 44 percent who got them 10 years earlier in 1998. If you feel your teenager is not ready, it's okay for you to decide that he or she will wait to get a license until he or she is older.

- Carefully weigh the pros and cons of having your teen get a driver's license versus riding with other teen drivers. (Your teenager will start riding with licensed drivers as soon as the opportunity arises.) Monitor who your teenager is riding with and what kind of driver that teenager is.