

Getting Your Kids to Wear Bike Helmets

Question: How do I get my reluctant child to wear a helmet?

Here are some useful tips. Among them, peer pressure is one of the most important. These ideas should help, but it may come down to the question of who is in charge.

Establish the helmet habit early when your children get their first bikes. If they learn to wear helmets whenever they ride it will become a habit for a lifetime. If possible, start them off with helmets while they are still on tricycles to establish the link between wheeled vehicles, pavement and helmets. It's never too late, however, to get your children into helmets.

Wear one yourself. Provide a role model for your kids; they learn best by observing you.

Encourage their friends to wear helmets. Peer pressure can be used in a positive way if several families in the neighborhood start making helmet use a regular habit at the same time. If no other kid in your neighborhood uses a helmet, your job will be a lot harder.

Talk to them about why you want them to protect their heads. Let them know:

- Their bikes are not toys, but their first vehicles;
- You love them and value them and their intelligence.
- They can hurt their heads permanently or even die from a head injury

Give your child a short course in bike safety, using a guide like Teaching Your Child to Ride A Bicycle. Placing the helmet in the context of a safety program shows that it is not just an arbitrary rule and helps underscore why you are requiring it. It is not enough to put a helmet on the child and send them off without some basic safety instruction.

Point out when watching sports events how many professional athletes use helmets. Football and hockey players, baseball batters and race car drivers wear them.

Take your child to a bicycle race. Bicycle racers are required to use helmets in the US, the Tour de France and almost everywhere. They will see--usually close up--really cool riders, competing in a hotly contested event, all of them using helmets.

Reward your kids for wearing helmets. Praise them; give them a special treat or privilege when they wear them without having to be told to.

Don't let them ride their bikes unless they wear their helmets. Be consistent. If you allow your children to ride occasionally without helmets, they will not believe your messages about the importance of wearing them. Tell them they have to find another way to play, or must walk or take a bus to get somewhere if they don't want to use their helmet.

Plan bicycle outings together when all family members wear their helmets. Ride with a local bike club if you can, where all members will probably be wearing helmets and many of them, like the racers, are accomplished riders.

Remember: Crashes causing head injuries can occur on sidewalks, driveways, bike paths, and parks as well as streets. You and your children cannot predict when a situation will occur that will end in a fall. It is important to wear a helmet whenever riding, even if it's just down the street or on a bike trail.