

Buying a Kid's Bike

We recommend that your child start out on a bicycle designed for easy riding.

When buying a kid's bike, you want to ensure that it is not too big or too small for the rider and that the riding position is comfortable. For reference, you can look at the specifications for the bike used during bike school in the *Equipment* section of our website (BicycleRidingSchool.org). We start our riders out on small bikes, so your child may be able to ride a slightly bigger bike than what they learned on (but don't push it). Many of our bikes have some sort of after-market modification – usually a stem riser or different handlebars. Don't let someone sell you a bike that's too big with the idea that "they will grow into it." This is dangerous to ride and very discouraging for a new rider.

When your child sits on the bike, their back should be relatively upright – not leaning over too much. The bicycle below on the left has higher handlebars, which allow an upright position. If you're buying a bike, the store may put more upright bars or a stem riser on for you, for not too much more money.



The best bike for a kid has at least one hand brake. Many little kids' bikes have only a coaster brake, which engages when the pedals are moved backwards. Coaster brakes are easier for kids to use, because their legs are stronger than their hands. However, this is dangerous because if the chain comes off or their feet are off the pedals, they have no way of stopping. If your kid struggles with the coaster brake, we recommend moving them to a freewheeling bike. Occasionally, for an added cost, a bike store will add a hand brake to a bike.

There are many other types of bicycles, besides those designed for easy riding, that are marketed to children – for example, "trick bikes" and BMX bikes. These other bicycles are built for bicycle sports, like freestyle street riding (similar to skateboarding) or dirt track racing (similar to motocross), and have modifications that make them harder to ride normally. We don't recommend trick bikes, BMX bikes, or any other kid's bike that isn't designed specifically for traveling safely and easily. To identify these bikes, look for features like axle extenders, extra long cranks, front wheels that turn all the way around, seats that are very low and tilted far from horizontal, smaller frames paired with larger wheels, really tall U-shaped handlebars, or brand names that are commonly associated with these kinds of bikes (Mongoose and GT, for example, although there are many more).

About how big should your kid's bike be?

Kids bikes are first categorized by wheel size – a 12" wheeled bike is referred to as a "12" bike". Use the table at the right to look up a recommended size for your kid's bike. (We left 18" bikes out of this list, since we don't have any, but just use your judgment.)

This advice recommends smaller bikes for a given size kid than most bike stores or websites do. See what works. This list isn't a prescription, it's a guideline - more athletic kids can comfortably ride bigger bikes, for example. Use this as a starting point and you'll find that it works in most cases.

If your child is taller than 5'3", look for adult bikes.

Child height	Wheel size	Frame size
< 3'6"	12"	n/a
3'6" to 3'10"	14"	n/a
3'10" to 4'2"	16"	9"
4'2" to 4'6"	20"	10"
4'6" to 4'9"	20"	11" to 12"
4'9" to 5'1"	24"	12"
5'1" to 5'3"	24"	14"

Frame Size: With each wheel size, the size of the frame varies. So there may be a 20" bike with a smaller frame that fits your rider well and another 20" bike with a larger frame that's too big. A kid who could ride 14" bike also could ride a small (8") frame 16" bike.

Reach to Ground and Seat Height: When the rider sits on the bike, they should be able to reach the ground with the balls of their feet firmly on the ground. If the new rider is still really nervous or just learning, they could even have their feet flat on the ground, which can improve stability and confidence. If the rider can only reach the ground with their tip-toes, the bike is too big or the seat needs to go down (until they are a fully confident rider who can stand up to get off and start up without being seated). You may need to raise the seat every few months as your child grows and improves! Watch for the vertical minimum insertion lines on the seat post.

Gears: Gears are helpful when going up a hill, but are not necessary and most kids' bikes don't have them.

Weight: Kid's bikes are built tough, which means that they are often heavier (proportionally) than adult bikes. Make sure that your child can easily lift the bicycle from the ground into an upright position for easy handling.

Pedals: If your child is young (3 or under) and just starting to ride, we recommend starting them on a balance bike with a hand brake or removing the pedals (if they have a hand brake) until they learn how to balance. Very young children will often stop with their feet, but encourage using hand brakes. We start teaching kids at the age of five.

Cranks: Some kids bikes have really long cranks (the things that the pedals go onto) so that the kid's knees have to go really high, which isn't easy unless they're very flexible. Measure cranks from the middle of the circle of the bottom bracket to the very end of the crank, a little past the pedal. Check the chart to the right for recommended crank lengths.

Wheel size	Crank length
12"	3.5"-4"
16"	4"-4.5"
20"	~5"
24"	~7"

Where to Buy a Bike

The most reliable place to get a bike is a local bike shop. They know what to look for and will help fit your child for a bike. They will often install accessories for free with the purchase of a new bike, and also fix any mechanical issues that show up in the first month or so. Wherever you get a bike, try to be sure the child sits on it first to check for sizing and ideally takes it for a test ride! Some people in bike stores have fixed ideas about height. They want the seat too high. Even if you have to argue, insist that your kid's balls of the feet be firmly on the ground, unless your child can already confidently stand up on the pedals to get off and on the bike. Finally, bike shops are very, very busy in the early spring, so if you can purchase your bike at another time of year, it will be easier for the bike shop to help you quickly.

Bike stores can be expensive. To find used bikes, try Facebook Marketplace, Craig's List, yard sales, or a shop that sells used bikes, or a company like Belsize (BelsizeBike.com) that sells refurbished bikes. There is also Play It Again Sports in Stoneham and Reading where people can exchange little bikes for bigger ones.

Some of the best bikes are sold online. They can be good, but, unless you're a mechanic or good amateur, you'll probably need help assembling them. Many shops will assemble these, but may add a surcharge.

Bike models our students have liked:

12" bikes: Schwinn Elm and Koen, from Target. The Woom 1 and Woom 1 Plus (Woom.com) are balance bikes with a hand brake. Joey bikes (JoeyBikes.com) and Royal Baby bikes (RoyalBabyGlobal.com) all have hand brakes.

14" bikes: Schwinn Elm and Koen from Target have coaster brakes and a hand brake. Woom 2 (Woom.com), freewheeling or coaster brake, like Green Giant. Guardian Ethos (GuardianBikes.com), freewheeling. Joey Mia (JoeyBikes.com), Hopper, 2-5 Ergonomic. Royal Baby bikes (RoyalBabyGlobal.com) all have hand brakes.

16" bikes: Try the Haro Shredder, from WheelWorks. It has a hand brake as well as a foot brake. Another is the Fuji Rookie. Other possibilities are the Schwinn Scorch, Piston, Koen and Elm, from Target. Woom bikes (Woom.com) are really light and are all pretty upright, except the ones labeled OFF (offroad). Another online choice is the Guardian Ethos (GuardianBikes.com) which is a freewheel with a single brake lever (and it's easy to assemble). Joey Mia and Hopper (JoeyBikes.com). There's also the free-wheeling Belsize Sports Belt-Driven bike (BelsizeBike.com). Royal Baby bikes (RoyalBabyGlobal.com) or Target.

18" bikes: Schwinn Koen and Elm at Target. Joey Ergonomic, Hopper and Mia (JoeyBikes.com). Royal Baby (RoyalBabyGlobal.com).

20" bikes: Specialized Riprock is a nice 20" bike with a 10" frame – but only the coaster brake model is upright (WheelWorks). Also try the Fuji Dynamite 20" Kids Mt Bike and Giant XTC JR or Giant Liv Adore. If those are too small, it's hard to find a 20" bike with an 11" or 12" frame that isn't too leaning over. One exception we know of is the Raleigh Jazzi. (We have put stem risers or changed the bars on almost all our 20" wheel 11"+ frame bikes). Cheaper brands do have larger frame 20" upright bikes, like our Schwinn Falcon (Midnight), also Amplify, Scorch, Koen and Elm at Target. Nishiki Pueblo Mountain Bike is another larger 20" bike (Dick's Sporting Goods.) Online you can get Joey Ergonomic and Hopper (JoeyBikes.com), the Woom 4 (Woom.com) or Royal Baby (RoyalBabyGlobal.com).

24" bikes: Giant XTC JR. Giant Liv Enchant or Giant Liv Flourish (like Rekha) at Farina's. Nishiki Pueblo Mountain Bike (Dick's Sporting Goods). Fuji Dynamite 24 Comp Kids Mt Bike. Woom 5 (Woom.com).

Inexpensive new bikes: We really don't recommend getting really cheap new bikes; used quality bikes are likely to be better for a similar price. But more affordable bikes can be found at places like Walmart, though they won't last as long and they're harder to fix. (Schwinn, already previously listed, is the high end of inexpensive bikes.) These bikes, 16" and under, probably won't have a hand brake, but some good ones, geometry-wise, are:

12" bikes: Magma Gravel Blaster, Kent Dino Power	20" bikes: Dynacraft Wipeout, Kent Chaos
16" bikes: Magma Major Damage	24" bikes: Roadmaster 24" girls Mt Bike (Walmart some find it too leaning over), Pacific Mt Adult Sport Bike (Amazon)
18" bikes: Hot Wheels, Kent Abyss	

Here's a whole write-up on affordable kids' bikes: twowheelingtots.com/best-cheap-kids-bikes/

Good luck. We wish buying your child a bike were easier; hopefully this has been some help.

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