

**FEATURE**  
*Kids on  
bikes*



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**PHOTOS** NEIL WHEADON & SIMON WALKER

# GROWING CYCLISTS

CTC tour leader **Neil Wheadon** explains what makes group rides with kids work, while **Dan Joyce** observes the joys of junior skills training

**I**t's the summer holidays. The sun is shining and your children have cabin fever. 'Let's go for a bike ride!' you say. They look up from the sofa: 'What? Five miles!?' If you're lucky, you'll cajole them. Often, it's a losing battle. Getting your children to enjoy cycling solely with you can be tricky.

If you can find other children with whom they can cycle it's completely different. They love it. They can cycle with their friends at a pace that is far quicker than they would with you. As long as they are fed and watered, 30 miles and a grand day out is achievable for most children over the age of seven. If they are younger, there are trailers, seats, trailer-cycles and tandems to facilitate cycling throughout the family years. I've done it and helped more than a hundred other families enjoy rides together too.

## FIRST FIND YOUR RIDE

Every family needs to start somewhere. For Sarah and me, it was through the Tandem Club ([tandem-club.org.uk](http://tandem-club.org.uk)). When the children arrived, we carried on but decreased the mileage. Tandems are perfect to adapt for all ages of children. Hannah Payton started this way – and she is on the CTC women's cycling team this year.

Your nearest CTC Member Group or CTC-affiliated cycling club would also be good places to look for family rides. Check their websites: you may be lucky enough to live in an area where family rides are already arranged. Just contact the organiser and turn up.

If there are no local family rides, why not set something up? You'll need to spread the word, so again your local group would be a good place to start. There will be other

families out there waiting for someone to get the ball rolling.

Start with a summer ride one weekend. Cycling with new friends in winter wind and rain isn't much fun. Get the map out and look for circular rides of about 20 miles so that everyone will easily finish.



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SUMMER HOLIDAY SPECIALS



**New Forest Cycling Week**

A FAMILY FAVOURITE for nearly 40 years, the New Forest Cycling Week at

Avon Tyrrell activity centre offers camping and informal rides on quiet roads and forest tracks. It costs only £8.50 per adult to camp, and £5.50 per night for children aged 5-14. Running from 26 July to 3 August, this year's event will just have started as you read this, so put it in your diary for 2014. See [newforestrallycc.org.uk](http://newforestrallycc.org.uk)



**CTC Birthday Rides**

CTC'S ANNUAL CYCLING holiday week runs from 18-24 August this year, and is based at Yarnfield Conference Centre near

Stone, Staffs. It's fully booked for 2013, so again, get it in your diary for next year. There are rides and social events every day and, crucially for children, other kids to socialise with. See [birthdayrides.org](http://birthdayrides.org)



**Mildenhall Rally**

MILDENHALL IS A classic cycle rally in Suffolk over the August Bank Holiday weekend, with

rides, grass track racing, trade stands, and events specifically for children. Camping is available from just £19 per pitch. See [mildenhallrally.org.uk](http://mildenhallrally.org.uk)

**“AS LONG AS THEY ARE FED AND WATERED, 30 MILES AND A GRAND DAY OUT IS ACHIEVABLE”**

Plan the day so there is plenty to do. I suggest aiming for a place of interest after about 12 miles – somewhere where the children can run around, refuel at a picnic, and enjoy each other's company off the bikes. Beaches, play parks, and castles are all good. Take a bat and ball or frisbee in your panniers so you can have an impromptu game. It's not just about the bike – although the children will learn that that's a fun way to get to the destination.

**KEEPING IT GOING**

During the ride there and back, remember to stop three or four times, maybe more. Not everyone cycles as fast as you can! Don't set off as soon as the tail-enders catch up; that's very demoralising. I carry some chocolate (Minstrels are good; they don't melt!) to buoy the mood of flagging children.



**In the photos**  
**1** Neil's 2012 château tour  
**2** Tandems are ideal for cycling families  
**3** Children can manage 20-30 miles on good quality bikes  
**4** Neil's 2013 tour of Stratford  
**5** Panniers are for picnics!

Work with other parents so that you can have an adult at the front and back. If you have teenagers with you, they will be faster than the rest of the group. If they want to race for a town sign, don't stop them. Just ask them to wait at the next junction or stopping point. Try not to cramp their style; let them cycle together as a little group and hang back a bit. I ride slightly further out into the road too, keeping an eye out behind.

Your initial ride doesn't have to cost much. All you need is a good route on quiet lanes or a cyclepath (see [sustrans.org.uk](http://sustrans.org.uk)), some wide open spaces, and lots of snacks. Don't organise your next ride too quickly. Monthly outings work well in cultivating a group of regular riders. Families are busy and monthly rides give everyone something to look forward to. You could finish the year with something off the bike, maybe a cinema trip?

**FURTHER AFIELD**

As time goes on, build the mileage up a little. Thirty miles is ideal, with a tea/snack stop in the morning and afternoon and a good place to visit at just past the halfway point. I've used this formula for ten years for CTC Holidays and Tours.

Of the seven families that came in my first year, all returned the next. It became an

annual event. It wasn't the parents that drove this but the children; they loved cycling with their friends. As this holiday was so popular, I started two more: a long weekend in May; and a château week abroad. Both are enjoyed by families who have developed such friendships that they also meet up at other times.

Organised events that involve cycling for children are harder to find. Even if children's activities are offered, you need to consider how much time the children will be occupied for – on and off the bike. Some UK rallies and similar events do offer family rides (see sidebar).

An enjoyable day's cycling doesn't have to be a loop on quiet lanes or Sustrans paths. There's always mountain biking on singletrack (see overleaf), and opportunities for road cycling on traffic-free circuits. I live near Bath, where children's cycling sessions take place both on the Castle Combe race track and on a newly-built outdoor track. These are fantastic for any child with a competitive edge. Check with your local cycling club or CTC Member Group for information on what's available nearby.

Ultimately, cycling with children is all about momentum. Once they discover the joys of group cycling with their peers, there will be no stopping them. ➤







**In the photos**

**6** 'Where are you looking when you're cornering?' asks Mike the instructor  
**7** Braking practice. Ten-year-old Hannah gets it right  
**8** Nearby school Lady Lumley's brought an all-girl group - who have now started riding locally

**MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAINING**

› 'How would you ride that?' CTC MTB trainer Mike Hawtin asked the group of five club cyclists aged 10-15 as they inspected a rock step the size of a stair tread. Some wanted to roll over it, others to jump off it. Mike demonstrated both and then the trainees took it in turns. 'Keep your chin up so that you look along the trail not at your front wheel,' he advised.

**“THE CTC SYSTEM FOCUSES ON WHY TO DO THINGS RATHER THAN SIMPLY HOW TO DO THEM”**

We were on Ellerburn Training Trail in Dalby Forest, which has three tiered skills loops, with trail features that increase in size and complexity. This was Mike's second group of junior trainees of the day; earlier he'd been teaching girls from a local school, Lady Lumley's in Pickering. I was hearing similar phrases in the second session from the first, despite the differences in rider experience. The information was coming not in separate blocks but in layers.

The training system was developed by Ian Warby, CTC's Senior Support Officer

for MTB Development, over a period of ten years. 'The system focuses on why to do things rather than simply how to do them,' he told me. 'This embeds the learning a lot deeper and enables the rider to adapt the skills so that they can be used on a range of trails as their skills and the opportunities to put them into practice progress.'

I observed this in the forest. Mike wasn't simply saying 'do this, do that'; he was explaining why, and he was instilling the same messages to both groups. He just had the more experienced riders going further with the same techniques. The first group exclusively cycled on loop one of the Ellerburn Training Trail; the second rode loops two and three as well.

**THE TRAINING EFFECT**

While you don't have to be trained to ride a bike off-road, you can learn in hours from an instructor what might take years to pick up through trial and error. Any level of rider can be catered for, from skilled

mountain bikers wanting to brush up their technique and eradicate bad habits, through to complete beginners.

'We see a real mix,' Mike told me afterwards, 'and over the years it's changed. Six or seven years ago it was predominantly men wanting to learn higher-end stuff - often after an accident had knocked the wind from their sails! Now we see lots of couples either new to mountain biking or wanting to build confidence on the stuff that scares them. "Dads and lads" are a regular booking type, and it's great for bonding. Women tend to book in pairs rather than on their own, and we have lots of groups of friends with varying abilities. I'm working with a school to fit a session around the mountain bike requirements in their Physical Education GCSE. We're also seeing lots of parents enquiring about sessions for their children and, if they ride, we ask if the parent would like to book on as well.'

Mountain bike skills sessions for ›





## GAINING TRAINING

CTC-accredited mountain bike skills training is available throughout the country.



**Dalby Bike Barn**  
Dalby Forest, Yorkshire Moors.  
INSTRUCTOR: Mike Hawtin.  
[dalbybikebarn.co.uk](http://dalbybikebarn.co.uk)



**South Downs MTB Skills**  
South Downs. INSTRUCTOR:  
Jim Barrow. <http://southdownshosting.co.uk/sussexmtbtours>



**All Biked Up**  
Surrey Hills. INSTRUCTOR:  
Richard Kelly. [mountain-bike-guiding.co.uk](http://mountain-bike-guiding.co.uk)



**Firecrest Mountain Biking**  
Aston Hill Bike Park, Bucks.  
INSTRUCTOR: Ian Warby.  
[firecrestmtb.com](http://firecrestmtb.com)



**Mountain Bike Tuition**  
The LookOut, Swinley Forest,  
Bracknell. INSTRUCTOR: Sarah  
Whelan. [mountainbiketuition.co.uk](http://mountainbiketuition.co.uk)



**Purple Bike Shed**  
The LookOut, Swinley Forest,  
Bracknell. INSTRUCTOR: Andy  
Guerin. [purplebikeshed.com](http://purplebikeshed.com)



**Campbell Coaching**  
North Wales. INSTRUCTORS:  
Bob and Ally Campbell.  
[campbellcoaching.eu](http://campbellcoaching.eu)



**UK Bike Skills**  
Hertfordshire & UK wide.  
INSTRUCTOR: Tony Doyle.  
[ukbikeskills.co.uk](http://ukbikeskills.co.uk)



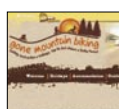
**MTB Skills**  
Scottish Borders & Mainland  
Europe. INSTRUCTOR: Clive  
Forth. [mtbskills.co.uk](http://mtbskills.co.uk)



**One Planet Adventure**  
Coed Llandegla Forest, North  
Wales. Instructor: Paul Jones.  
[oneplanetadventure.com](http://oneplanetadventure.com)



**CycleActive**  
Penrith, Cumbria.  
INSTRUCTOR: Chris Ford.  
[cycleactive.co.uk](http://cycleactive.co.uk)



**Gone Mountain Biking**  
Dalby Forest, Yorkshire Moors.  
INSTRUCTOR: Mike Hawtin.  
[gonemountainbiking.com](http://gonemountainbiking.com)

CTC also offers a range of courses for Trail Leaders, Skills Instructors and more. More details at [ctc.org.uk/mtb](http://ctc.org.uk/mtb)



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children work on a number of levels. It's a fun day out in itself, in the sense of being outdoors, mastering new skills. Kids seem to enjoy mountain biking anyway – messing about on your bike on dirt tracks is quintessential play. And training instils techniques that enable children to ride with more confidence and control, opening up horizons and reducing the risk of falling. Several years ago, I took two of my boys on

## “TRAINING INSTILS TECHNIQUES THAT ENABLE CHILDREN TO RIDE WITH MORE CONFIDENCE AND CONTROL”

a skills session – with Mike, coincidentally – prior to a holiday in the Tweed Valley. They enjoyed it much more as a result.

### HOW IT WORKS

All the participants could already ride a bike, of course, but Mike began with both groups by going through some of the basics: using gears (skipped for the more

experienced second group), braking, and body position on the bike. They practised these things on flat, wide forest tracks before transferring them to the singletrack. The emphasis was on staying in control. ‘If you skid,’ Mike said during the braking session, ‘you’re not in control. Stand up on level cranks and push the bike through. Use both brakes.’

With each skill, Mike asked for questions, then explained the technique, demonstrated it, and had the participants practise it. It worked well and quickly, the difference between braking badly and effectively being much clearer for someone who has not only been told this fact but been asked to try both, back to back.

Once the kids had mastered the basics, Mike moved them on to the skills loops, to practise small bumps and cornering. ‘We want the bike to move underneath us and our body to stay nice and still,’ Mike said, once again showing the difference between wrong and right.

Soon the trainees were freewheeling confidently in the ‘ready position’. Mike continued to give advice: ‘heavy pedals, light hands’; ‘heels down’; ‘drop your wrists’. Then it was cornering: ‘Spot your exit rather than looking at your front wheel. If you look down you’ll go around



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**In the photos**

- 9** The Ellerburn Training Trail has three circuits
- 10** Inspecting the drop-off and assessing options...
- 11** ...which are: roll over it or jump
- 12** Easier trails remain a good place for more experienced riders to practise technique

the corner like you're going around a 50-pence piece instead of a smooth curve.'

There was one minor tumble in the first group, but the rider got back on her bike and completed the skills loop before the end of the session. With the second group, Mike went into more detail, talking about: not over-rotating around the handlebar: body position when climbing; and more.

One striking feature about the instruction, looking from the outside in, was the emphasis on positive language. That wasn't due to 'political correctness' or even for morale, but for a practical reason. 'If you're told "don't do that, it's wrong", the next time you're in that situation you end up thinking negatively about what you did wrong,' Mike said. 'You can freeze up. So the question is not "what did you do wrong?" but "what should you do more of?"'


**THE VERDICT**

The feedback from the participants after the skills courses was positive. There was a lot of information to absorb, but although they had come to Dalby straight from school, they were all engaged and interested.

'It worked really well,' Lady Lumley's teacher Julie Heyes told me. 'The girls felt comfortable and supported. We've struggled to attract enough girls to make a girls-only group before now so this could be the start of something! Being an all-girls group, I think it was less intimidating for them, especially as they were supportive of each other. They want to put their skills into practice now, and have already started riding locally.'

Cavan Walker was in the second group. His dad Simon said: 'Cavan thinks the course helped him in realising why he goes over the bars quite often, and how he can rectify this: head up! Although Mike talked more than Cavan was hoping, he actually learned more than the lessons he has had that were more about doing than listening. He really liked it.'


Cavan's feelings were echoed by the youngest participant, ten-year-old Hannah Langdale. 'I liked doing the steps the best,' she said. 'I learned to keep my bum behind my seat and keep my chin up. I would like to do it again with my family because I enjoyed it.'



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