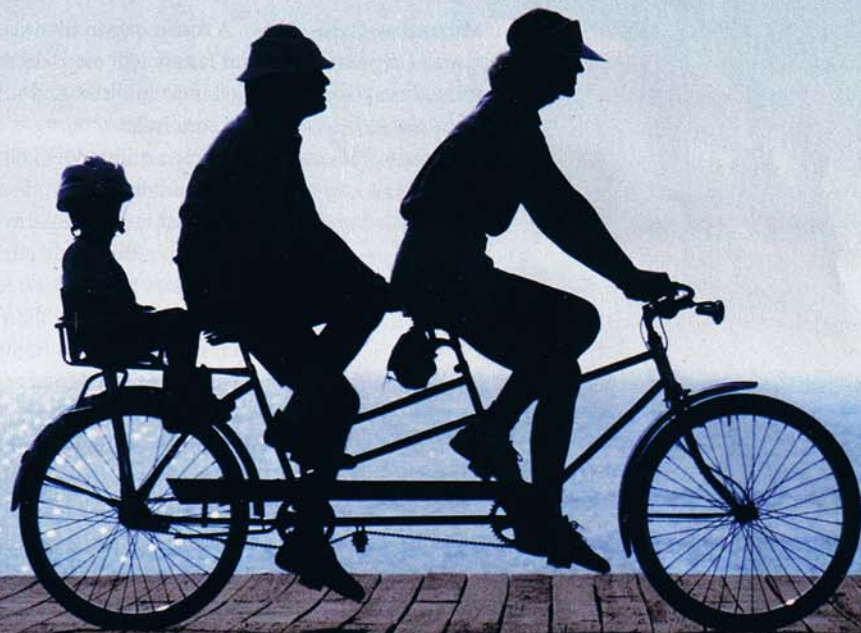


The wheels on the bike go round and round



GETTY IMAGES/GREG PEASE

It's never too early to get kids out of the car and on to a bike, even if they can't ride by themselves. The benefits go well beyond saving the planet.

Words by Elissa Baxter

Thirty-six cats. That's our record for cat-spotting on the way to pre-school. Yet in the days when I used to drive my four-year-old daughter Nell to pre-school, we never noticed the neighbourhood cats. Hopping on the bike together, however, allows us to keep tabs on local feline activity, not to mention enjoy the feel of the wind in our hair while getting a little exercise.

My original motivation for getting on a bike was to save on petrol costs and reduce my contribution to planet-warming car exhaust emissions – I really didn't like the idea of driving just three kilometres to childcare. Three years of riding later, the insistent shouts of "bike, bike, bike" from the kids as we get ready in the morning are their own reward. They love nothing better than watching the world go by on two wheels, and I wouldn't have it any other way. »



Cycling the safe way

There can be a mental barrier to getting out on regular cycle trips: concern for your kids' safety while riding in traffic, particularly in cities where drivers are notoriously fast and furious.

But as long as you choose the routes that are most suitable, and are keenly aware of visibility and predictability, there's no reason why fear should stand in the way of a healthier future for your family, or for the planet.

Give your confidence a boost by tracking down maps that feature the best back-streets and bike-designated roads. Sydney has a little book called *Bike It* (www.bike-it.com.au), Travel Smart produces a similar map for Melbourne, and Brisbane City Council produces Bikeway maps which are downloadable from its website (www.brisbane.qld.gov.au).

Keep clear of high-traffic roads where you can, and, of course, make sure everyone is helmeted up with proper-fitting headwear!



Wheely good fun: (clockwise from below, left) rear-mounted kids bike seats are best for children four and over; the "Cabby" model by Gazzelle Bicycles; the author's husband Simon with son Isaac, on a tag along bike; the Countdown Cargo Bike.

» A testimony to the variety of two-wheeling options out there, our family will often do the school run on two bikes: me with Nell in a child seat and my husband, Simon, with our seven-year-old son, Isaac, on a tag-along bike. Isaac loves the attention he gets from riding down city streets on a tag-along, which looks like an adult/child tandem. In reality, Isaac gets to wave to passing cars while Simon does all the muscle-work!

Instilling this 'cycle culture' in the family means that our first thought about how to get somewhere is always the spoked wheel rather than the petrol-guzzler. And within a year or two, we're confident that both kids will have enough road sense to make short trips on their own bikes, setting the stage for a lifelong love of eco-friendly transport.

Families on bikes seem to be a growing trend, particularly as thoughts of sustainability – a key to the future health and happiness of our kids – come to the fore. And really, what better way to cut emissions, drop the hassle of finding a good parking spot and ditch the laziness of motorised transport?

If you want to join the crowd pedalling with the kids, the first step is to decide what equipment suits you best. Fortunately, there is a range of options, from simple bike seats to trailers, tag-along bikes and purpose-built cargo bikes.

Child seats

There is a range of seats that can be attached either over the back wheel, or just behind the handlebars along the centre bike stem.

Front-mounted seats are great for smaller kids; the child rides in between an adult's arms, making it easier to hold a conversation with them and check on their comfort. They also have less effect on the bike's centre of gravity, so the ride is more stable than a rear-mounted seat. But kids grow out of front-mounted seats quickly, and older children (around age four, or 15 to 18 kg) need to ride on a rear-mounted seat. Try BoBike front-mounted seats (\$199) or rear-mounted seats (\$249) from www.mamabike.com.au.

Trailers and tag-along bikes

When kids are at the in-between stage of being too big for a child seat but still too small to ride alone, a tag-along bike can solve the dilemma for a few years. They're also great for older kids in situations where considerable traffic may be encountered, because the parent does all the steering.



PHOTOLIBRARY



There are purpose-built tag-alongs that include just a back wheel, seat and pedals, but there are also tow bars to connect full adult and children's bikes together by lifting the child's front wheel off the ground and turning it into a temporary tandem.

Another drag-behind option is a bike trailer, holding one, two or even three kids. Most have space for a small amount of extra cargo, too, like a couple of shopping bags, perfect for running day-to-day errands. Some models, like the Burley range, even have conversion kits so they can do double-duty as a pram.

Try the Burley D'Lite two-child trailer (\$1,199) and stroller kit (\$72) – call Netti on 02 9550 1655; WeeRide Co-Pilot (\$199.95), www.weeride.com.au; or Trail-Gator cycle tow bar (\$136.95), www.cycletow.com.au.

Purpose-built cargo bikes

If you are looking to transport more than one child, or some larger loads of shopping, consider a purpose-built cargo or passenger bike.

Dutch company Gazelle Bikes (www.gazellebicycles.com.au) takes its environmental credentials very seriously, using only water-based paints and building according to stringent European environmental standards. Their Australian distributor stocks the "Cabby" model (\$3,449), a two-wheeler with a carrying capacity of up to 200 kg that can seat kids or convert to carry cargo.

PS Bikes (www.psbikes.com.au) in Melbourne distributes the Danish-made Christiania bike (\$3,250), which can carry up to three children and can even be fitted with capsules for babies.

Melbourne entrepreneur Justin Mason builds a less pricey alternative. His "Countdown" bike (\$700, pictured above and available from www.cargobikes.com.au) has a plywood crate affixed to the front. Unless you're a glutton for punishment, you wouldn't want to be riding this one up lots of hills – the bike alone weighs 49 kilograms! However, it's perfect for shorter trips and on flat routes and can also be fitted with standard child car seats. **G**

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