

CHILDREN'S NEWS

THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
THE FALL 2008 CHILDREN'S NEWS,
A PUBLICATION OF CHILDREN'S COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO



Children's News

Volume XXXIV, No. 4

published quarterly by/
publicado trimestralmente por

Children's Council of San Francisco
445 Church Street
San Francisco, CA 94114

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BICYCLES AS AN ECONOMICAL, PRACTICAL TRANSPORTATION OPTION FOR SAN FRANCISCO FAMILIES

BY JULIE LODER

It's another morning in San Francisco and the sun is not promising a hot day. It might turn out to be downright chilly, but there are hundreds of bicyclists rolling up pant legs as they, and their children, make their way to work, school and child care.

That's right: increasingly, families are finding ways to leave their cars – and their car seats – in the garage, and are using bicycles to help them get around the city. On Bike to Work Day 2008, twice as many bicyclists as motorists traveled eastbound on Market Street past Van Ness Avenue between 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., according to the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency. The same study cited a 31 percent increase in bicyclists on the road at the same time and place over 2007 figures, proving that even government agencies are witnessing a shift on city streets.

Bicycling has always been a wholesome form of recreation for adults and children alike. It offers the opportunity to be outdoors and physically active, and is something that different age groups can enjoy together. But as the prices of oil and gas skyrocket, bicycling is taking on another role in family life: it is a means of practical, economical transportation. Bicycle enthusiasts have pushed the industry to develop a variety of bike accessories that make riding – even commuting – with small children, possible.

Safety

Now you might be thinking, sure, it might be economical, but is bicycling with my children safe?

Sadly, the truth is that there are neighborhoods in San Francisco where a child is not safe drawing on the sidewalk with chalk, playing in a front yard, or bicycling from one street to another. People have the right to safe communities. Creating safe neighborhoods for adults and children is a much larger issue than bicycling. Whether you are a family trying to make your front stoop secure, or a community group trying to make sure a local recreation facility is safe for young people, you share a common goal with bicycle advocates; you want to ensure your safety on the street.

Usually people compare riding a bicycle to riding in a motor vehicle when trying to decide if bicycling is a safe form of transportation. This natural comparison brings us to challenge common notions of how safe we feel in cars.

Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for individuals ages 5-34 in California, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Disease Control. Among 1-4 year olds, motor vehicle accidents are one of the most leading causes of death, second to drowning by only 6 percentage points.



Bicycles can be a safe, inexpensive way to get around town.

Clearly, we are not as safe in a car as we may feel. Being on a bicycle, however, is becoming safer. The number of bicycle injuries decreased by 20 percent in the San Francisco Bay Area between 1997 and 2006, according to the California Highway Patrol. That fact is all the more encouraging because over the same years, the number of cyclists on the

streets has increased.

One possible explanation for this statistic is that as more cyclists ride every day, bicycles become more commonplace on the transportation landscape. Drivers are becoming more conditioned to sharing the road with bicyclists, which results in fewer accidents.

Gearing Up

The statistics suggest that compared to being in a car, being on a bike is safe.

Moreover, introducing bicycling to your children is not only physically safe in the short-term, it is also physically health-promoting in the long run. Instilling habits of a physically active lifestyle in your children can help prevent the onset of debilitating health conditions later in their lives. Some of the most prevalent diseases in the United States, including heart disease and Type 2 Diabetes, are largely preventable by a healthy, active lifestyle. Bicycling is a great way to incorporate exercise into daily life.

If you're ready to give bicycling a try, we've compiled a bit of advice for you.

Choose Your Wheels, Save Your Dollars

Bicycles come in all varieties and sizes. Top of the line bicycles are mind-bogglingly expensive (just like fancy cars). But for casual riders, there exist a number of quality, affordable bicycles. Children outgrow bicycles as quickly as they outgrow shoes. That said, there is no need to buy a brand new bicycle for a child who is going to outgrow it soon. There are a number of programs that can help you to find or fix up a used bicycle at no to low-cost. Parents can find more information on fixing a bicycle on the Bike Kitchen's website, found at www.bikekitchen.org. More information on the bicycle community in San Francisco can be found on the San Francisco Bike Coalition's (SFBC's) website at www.sfbike.org. Used bicycles are often posted online at www.craigslist.org.

Protect your head

There are several brands and designs of bike helmets. Regardless of your choice, the most important aspect of your decision is that your helmet fits you and is secured properly. No swinging chin straps, please!

A detailed guide to fitting the perfect helmet can be found on the Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute's website at www.helmets.org/fit.htm.

Never had a chance to learn to ride a bike? It's never too late! Want some help teaching your child to ride? There are riding classes for you and your children available through SFBC or your local YMCA. Get counsel from the experts so you and your child learn the right way.

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Make sure your helmet fits!