

How to "Lose the Training Wheels:" A New Way to Teach Bicycle Riding

Contributed by [Kim Davis](#)

Recreation activities for individuals with autism can be challenging to find or create. Families often struggle to fill time with activities the entire family might be able to enjoy, especially during the long summer months when school is not in session. What did many of us do when we were younger to help fill summer time hours? One universal activity that helped fill the time was riding a bike. Riding a bike gave us freedom to go from place to place, allowed us time to ride with friends, and gave us a feeling of accomplishment, especially when we first learned how to ride. Remember the thrill of losing the training wheels and how terrific that feeling was? Now there is a program that helps people with autism (and other disabilities) share in that thrill. It is called "Lose the Training Wheels." According to their website (<http://www.losethetrainingwheels.org/>):

In January 2007, a group of concerned parents, therapy professionals, and business leaders formed **Lose the Training Wheels, Inc., of Mclean VA**, which was granted classification as a 501(C) 3 charity. The mission of Lose the Training Wheels, Inc. is to cause a national and international adapted bicycling program to grow.

The origin of the adapted bicycling program had its genesis in the research of Dr. Richard E. Klein at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Richard and Marjorie Klein conducted the program in recent years under the name of Rainbow Trainers, Inc. On February 26, 2007, Lose the Training Wheels, Inc., and Rainbow Trainers, Inc., entered into a mutual contract agreement whereby the program would be operated by Lose the Training Wheels, Inc.

Their mission states: "We want children, in particular children with disabilities, to be able to ride conventional bicycles without training wheels who would otherwise be relegated to staying on training wheels, standing by, or riding what we regard to be cumbersome special purpose bikes and tricycles."

Our Working Premise: The Lose The Training Wheels program is a short-term bicycle training experience designed to provide an environment conducive to learning to ride a bike. We utilize specialized equipment as well as coaching and encouragement. We are able to work with a wide array of children and even adults. The children who do best in our programs should be

- Ambulatory;
- Capable of pedaling;
- Have rudimentary balance capacity;
- Have use of all limbs;
- Have adequate vision to see and avoid obstacles;
- Capable of functioning in a social setting with other children, along with the ability to grasp and to follow simple instructions; and
- Most importantly, have the **desire** to lose the training wheels.

Moreover, if the **desire** is sufficiently strong, the other cited requirements can be relaxed somewhat as **desire** will take the child a long way towards the goal of riding a

two-wheeler.

Think of the possibilities learning to ride a bicycle can create. Your child would learn to do something almost every other child does on a regular basis. Motor coordination, sensory integration, self-confidence, and inclusion in activities that before learning could not happen. The opportunity to create friendships and to participate in community bike rides is enhanced tremendously. Riding a bike is more than just sitting and pedaling and opens up more than the road ahead.

Here are some testimonials (from the website):

My son Josiah attended your camp this summer (2004) in Minnesota. My son is 12 years old (autistic) and he had never ridden a bike before. He learned to ride a bike during the camp quickly and now he loves riding a bike. He rides a bike everyday and not only does he ride, but he started to experiment with dare devil things!! He learned to go up and down the deck. Of course, he learned to keep his hands off the handlebars once in a while.... ;) I brought him to a nearby lake where he can go up and down the steep hill and he totally loved it. He went up and down so many times trying to get better at it!! We are thinking about getting him a mountain bike next year so he won't destroy his new cruiser bike!

Thank you so much for opening up a new world for Josiah. He loves biking, he feels good about himself, and it's a great exercise!!

Name withheld, Minneapolis, MN

Hi Dick and Marj,

I know you and Marj will be happy to know that we have been riding bikes with Jacob (diagnosed with autism, age 13) consistently at least 1x weekly, while the weather has been warm. It is just about too cold now to ride, but Jacob has the riding thing down well, that I don't think we will lose any abilities over the winter. We are so proud of Jacob, and he is so proud of himself, as well. I hope you know what a difference you are making in the lives of families, such as ourselves. If there is anything we can ever do to help on this end, please let me know.

Name withheld, Lewes, DE

The testimonials are wonderful, however a word of caution. Dr. Klein is very open on his website stating that there are some individuals who may not benefit from this program. Children under 5 years of age have not been very successful in the past. He also states "that we have noted a number of reasons that arise concerning the children who don't succeed." These reasons are:

- Severe obesity;
- Severe CP;
- Severe autistic characteristics;
- Low stamina;
- Severe oppositional behavior;
- Severe or total blindness (lack of sight);
- Inability to be ambulatory, thus needing assistive devices for locomotion;

- An absence of working limbs;
- Profound and severe low cognitive; and,
- A general lack of motivation to want to ride a two-wheeler.

However, children with autism and other disabilities are learning to ride bicycles by attending summer camps. The opportunity is also there, according to Dr. Klein, for more communities to have a camp locally. Lose The Training Wheels has created camps where local organizations and institutions have agreed to work with them. The institutions provide the gymnasium or similar facility, the means to recruit about 24 to 35 children, volunteers to be trained as child assistants (spotters), a bike camp director to serve as coordinator, and a budget or means to generate funding to support the camp. Once all agree on a date (a week, in general), they see to it that bikes arrive and someone properly trained is there to spearhead the camp.

The best way to get an adapted bike camp up and going is to identify some local charity, institution, or organized group that can be urged to get involved. The very nature of the Lose the Training Wheels program works best when it is partnered with local groups, a school district, park district, religious body, charity, business, or even a civic club.

Currently there are dates for two camps in Indiana for summer 2009. These camps are not specific to individuals with autism, but can certainly be something to explore.

- May 18 to May 22, 2009 – Muncie, IN. They expect to set up at Ball State University. Sessions will be after school hours. The contact person is Dr. Tammy Burt, email burt_62@yahoo.com
- June 22 to June 26, 2009 – Indianapolis, IN. The contact for this date is Connie Merkel, email cmerkel@eastersealscrossroads.org.

Learning to ride a bicycle is fun and hard work. It may not be successful for everyone, but would be worth talking to the experts at Lose the Training Wheels.

Davis, K. (2008). How to "lose the training wheels:" A new way to teach bicycle riding. *The Reporter*, 14(1), 10-11, 22.