

Intergenerational Mobility Having Fun on Bikes with the Grandkids

Rick Holt

The design of the transportation network can make it easier, or more difficult, for children and older adults to get safe access to the infrastructure that is fundamental to being active outdoors in the built environment. Getting on a bike has been shown to foster social interaction and build community. There are some areas in the U.S. where elected officials are changing the paradigm and creating safe streets for all, and places for people to travel safely through the built environment while walking and biking. However, we still have a long way to go, though, to realize the benefits that a well-designed transportation network can have for the health and well-being of older adults and children.

Getting outdoors and active is great for the health and well-being of children and older adults alike. Biking is a great way for children and adults to achieve the recommended levels

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**Secretary Pete Buttigieg
US Dept of Transportation**

of physical activity, outdoors and socializing with others at the same time. While it is known that outdoor activity, and

biking, is beneficial, there seem to be barriers to both groups getting the recommended amount of time needed to realize the benefits. In fact, children have been bicycling less over the past couple of decades, and a significant number of older adults have reported not meeting the physical activity guideline for aerobic activity.

However, I have figured out the most amazing way to get the recommended amounts of physical and social activity. It is simple; I get out biking with my granddaughters. Not only do I get the recommended amounts of physical activity and social interaction, but they do as well. So, it is a win-win for granddaughters and grandpa.

It is a thrill to be there to see your granddaughters learn how to ride a bike. This seems to run in the family as my father was also there when my daughters took their first solo bike rides. There are so many satisfying aspects to the experience: being able to spend time with your grandkids, being involved in their growth and development, and creating memories together. It is all so fulfilling, and my daughters are happy too as I take the girls off their hands for a little while. I have put together the five key ingredients for helping grandkids learn how to bike plus I have made a list of the key other modern and super-fun ways to complement this learning. Here's my magic list for spending high-quality time with the grandkids:

1. Learning with balance bikes,
2. Add a traffic garden,
3. Work on skills development,
4. Incorporate e-Bikes,
5. And focus on intergenerational learning.



You and the littles can develop your safety awareness and get a better understanding of the design of the built environment in the process, while learning, having fun, making memories, and earning brownie points with your own offspring in the process.

Many kids today don't have the same level of freedom that many older adults once had, so they need to have it added to their everyday life. Children need to experience challenging play to explore their boundaries and discover subsequent outcomes. Supporting your grandchild by getting outdoors with them, helping them

experience mobility, and playing in a high-value learning environment, is a wonderful way to offer a structured challenge, a way for your grandchild to try out a fun, new activity while staying within your risk comfort zone.

Walking along with your grandkids while they ride their balance bike is active and engaging. Helping them create a traffic garden is active and engaging, biking helps with social engagement and development of skills needed in school for social and emotional interactions. Riding an e-Bike helps you stay active and engaged with your grandkids while they bike, and intergenerational learning helps us engage with grandkids while learning from each other. So, you may be asking. what is a balance bike, a traffic garden, or an e-Bike? What are social-emotional skills and intergenerational learning? Well, hang on for the ride while learning the five things that will support active engagement with grandkids.

I started four granddaughters (ages 3 and 5) off on balance bikes to help them learn how to ride a two-wheeler. What is a balance bike you ask? Balance bikes are a type of bicycle without pedals or a chain. Instead, children propel themselves along by pushing off with their



feet while sitting on the saddle. Balance bikes have a low center of gravity and help children develop much better balance and coordination than starting out on a two-wheeler with training wheels. Learning to ride on a balance bike helps children learn how to ride a pedal bike earlier than by using training wheels. This supports getting active with your grandkids while they are younger and supports active living for you as you walk along with them while they have fun and develop their skills. This type of reinforcement helps motivate



kids to get outdoors more and be active. Of course, they are also going to ask you to get outside more often with them so they can bike.

Balance bikes started appearing in the U.S. in the 1990s. They are becoming more common, but people still do not realize that balance bikes are the best device for learning how to bicycle. Cycling can be foundational in child development. Researchers studying fundamental movement found that there was a strong connection between experience on a balance bike and basic movement skills. The earlier that children learn to how bike, the earlier they benefit



from enhanced movement skills. For more information on balance bikes and bike education for children go to

<https://kidswalkbike.com>.

Traffic Gardens

I made learning a fun experience by engaging with my grandkids in building a pop-up traffic garden in my cul-de-sac. Yet another new term! You are asking yourself, what is a traffic garden? A traffic garden is a set of small-sized streets with scaled-down traffic features and other fun elements painted on a hard surface. Children navigate and practice using roadways, intersections, and crossings in a

safe and fun environment free of motor vehicles. Traffic gardens were highlighted in a [Build the Era presentation in May 2022](#).

Developing social-emotional skills and safety awareness

My granddaughters imitate my actions while on the bike - this is what learning looks like and it is so gratifying to transfer these lessons intergenerationally. They have started to do hand signals when I tell them we are getting ready to turn while biking on the road on my e-Bike. They are also paying more attention to where we are going and give me directions such as "go that way, Grampie!" when deciding where we should travel. Our travels foster curiosity; the girls want to discover new parts of the built environment and are becoming much more aware of their surroundings, not something that happens when they are strapped into their car seats. They have developed a level of observational skills that my granddaughters have now

actually started to point out driving behavior of others that are unacceptable. They notice drivers not stopping at stop signs, driving distracted while looking at phones, and driving too fast. They do not approve of their elders behaving in these fashions.



There has been a steady and steep decline in the amount of

time children spend outdoors playing over the last few decades. There are lots of reasons, everything from technology to over-anxiety about perceived dangers. Balance bikes and traffic gardens create a safe enough space for to children to engage in imaginary play, while also enjoying the opportunity for challenging play and outdoor fun. This type of activity not only benefits the child, but also the grandparent as you get more outdoor activity and social engagement with grandkids as well as other people in the neighborhood. Supporting development of social-emotional skills in early childhood can also have a positive effect on children's performance in early childhood education settings.

E-Bikes

One of my favorite quotes is, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." - George Bernard Shaw. The first time I headed out on a ride with my granddaughters on my new electric cargo bike I knew instantly I was in for a real grandparent treat that is not to be missed. Pedaling along with two smiling kids on the back and easily negotiating the hills with pedal assist in the neighborhood made the adventure very achievable even for me in my semi-retirement years. I have biked all my life, but these days, at my age, it helps to have a little pedal assist now and then. Recent research studies have examined how policy initiatives and local programs could stimulate e-bike use and get more people active on bikes. E-bikes support older adults trying out biking or continuing to bike more often and longer than with an "acoustic" bike. With American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) working to influence policies that will enable people to age in place in livable communities, it is important that the e-bike be included in the discussion. As AARP promotes active aging, we need work to enact policies that promote the use of e-Bikes, as well as safe infrastructure like off-road/separated trails or protected bike lanes. e-Bikes, help you stay active outdoors with your grandkids, can improve your mental health and well-being, and provide more opportunities for you to engage with them in play and conversation.

Intergenerational learning

Have I mentioned how much I really enjoy spending time with my granddaughters and seeing their joy at discovering new concepts and activities? Biking with grandkids can help older adults meet personal health and wellness goals, while helping their grandkids achieve CDC-recommended developmental and physical activity goals. Biking with your grandkids can also give both of you an independent mobility option, one that helps you stay active and contributes to your grandkids' self-confidence and growth.

There are both immediate and long-term benefits of intergenerational learning. Research shows that intergenerational learning provides for the sharing and transfer of knowledge, skills, and experiences between generations (Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008). I spent time reading children's books about traffic safety and talking about things to be aware of while cycling with one of my granddaughters. We went out on a bike ride several weeks later and



each time we stopped at an intersection she would ask me questions like "why is that person driving so fast?" or "why is that person staring at their phone while driving?" and "why is that person not stopping at the stop sign?"

These new concepts also come out when she is engaged in dramatic play in various settings, including

in the traffic garden we created with chalk. She experiments with these terms and talks about traffic safety issues as she role plays.

I have a fun time biking around with my granddaughters. It is always a joy getting to spend time with them and talking about their experiences. Meanwhile I am getting great exercise! They learn more about the built environment at an early age, spend more time being physically active outdoors, develop foundational movement skills, kick off the development of a lifelong health habit, and spend time with their grandfather. This is now a tradition in my family as my father was also there when my daughters took their first solo bike rides. All of this is a win-win-win-win - how many great experiences can I keep stacking together? What a wonderful way to embody the AARP focus on livable communities and active living for older adults! The time with my grandkids also provides me with the opportunity to share the knowledge that I have learned over the past two decades as a person who is focused on creating safe streets for all ages and abilities. Children are the future leaders of our country,

they need to understand how the built environment is designed, and they should have a voice in how the transportation network is designed.

Staying curious, learning about new developments, deploying innovative ideas, and engaging socially with our grandkids is all very much within our reach. By putting together spending time with the grandkids, the super-simple mechanism of the balance bike, the magic of a traffic garden project, e-bikes for grandparents, and intergenerational learning about road safety and interactions about town, we can share great experiences and life-long memories for our grandkids.

Increasing awareness among older adults and children of the need for safe infrastructure, and how the built environment can be designed to encourage outdoor activity, can lead towards policy change. Both groups can have a voice in influencing elected officials to make changes to current policies, laws, and design of infrastructure projects, that are needed to “to foster a healthy community”, since “ultimately, all infrastructure is social.” (Secretary Pete Buttigieg).

Rick Holt is a grandparent, League Certified Instructor with the League of American Bicyclists, and co-founder of the Early Childhood Mobility Coalition, kidwalkbike.com. He lives in the Cincinnati, OH, area, and bikes often with his granddaughters in the neighborhood and on local trails. Contact him at: rick@trafficgardens.com.

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