



ARTICLE FROM THE BOOK:

**Cyclists & Cycling Around the World – Creating Liveable and Bikeable Cities**

Edited by Juan Carlos Dextre, Mike Hughes & Lotte Bech

Published by Fondo Editorial, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2013

ISBN: 978-612-4146-55-8

## Cycle Training for Children – take a child’s perspective and make it fun!

Mai-Britt Kristensen and Loa Bendix, Danish Cyclists’ Federation, Denmark

**W**hen people from abroad visit Denmark, they are often amazed by our bicycle culture. ‘How come you cycle so much?’ they ask. The short answer is: we start early.

In Denmark, teaching the child to bike is considered the parents’ responsibility, and we generally expect that children can cycle when they start school. Schools then teach them about traffic rules and traffic safety and often also participate in campaigns like ‘Bike to School’. In fact, 45 % of Danish children frequently cycle to school.

Yet, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels because the number is actually decreasing. If we are not careful, our renowned bicycle culture could be gone in a generation. So in collaboration with the municipalities, the Danish Cyclists’ Federation is making great efforts to get day-care centres and schools more involved in building and strengthening children’s bicycle culture. The ground for a healthy and active life as a cyclist is laid in childhood, because if you do not cycle as a child, chances are that you will not cycle as an adult either.

### Get a head start with a training bike

People often think of cycling as something you learn when you start school. In fact, it is much better to start earlier. Nursery-school children are of course too small to cycle by themselves in traffic, but they are not too small to learn to cycle. Children down to two years of age are quite ready to start practising on a training bicycle, which is a two-wheel bike without pedals.



Children down to two years of age can start practising on a training bike. You will be amazed at what they can do, and how quickly they learn.

In addition to practising balance and motor skills, a training bike also makes the child more mobile. Taking a walk for instance becomes much more fun. But the training bike is also an amazing way to learn how to bike, and often, learning to ride a regular bike goes quite easily because the child already has good balance. Once it has learned to pedal and brake, it can start practising other manoeuvres. But how do you get the child to practise cycling without it becoming an irksome duty?

### **Cycle training through play**

Children learn through movement and play. Likewise, games provide a most enjoyable and effective form of cycle training. Over the last four years, the Danish Cyclists' Federation has developed a concept known as 'Cycling games,' which consists of a list of well-known children's games, such as 'Tag' and 'Follow the Leader,' which have been converted into cycling games for children from 2-12 years.

When playing cycling games, the children have to concentrate on several things at a time: keeping their balance, pedaling, steering. They must also keep an eye on the other kids cycling about, follow the game, and listen to the instructions of an adult. In short, there are many things to keep track of.



Cycling games can be adjusted so they keep challenging the child. Here, a boy is playing 'Follow the Leader' – advanced level.

But through the games, the children get better coordination, timing, and balance, and slowly they become one with their bike. And best of all: they do this almost without noticing because they are just playing and having fun.

Some nursery schools have really embraced the cycling games concept and integrated it into their pedagogy. For instance, the kids from 'Hylet', a Copenhagen nursery school, play cycling games each Friday. Then you will see the kids with their small yellow vests pulling their bikes to the plaza across the street and then wheel (or spurt if on a training bike) around the plaza catching soap bubbles with their helmets to name just one activity.

The leader of 'Hylet', Erik Nielsen explains their decision to use cycling games:

"Cycling benefits the child's development in many ways. It contains a lot of the elements that help develop the child both physically, motorically, psychologically, and cognitively ... Cycling also entails a lot of social activity, and last but not least, it creates joy and helps build up the child's self esteem."



Cycling games are a great pedagogical tool – and the kids love it. Here, a girl from 'Hylet' nursery school tries to keep her balance and concentration during an unexpected splash of water.

The Bicycle Games project is under continuous development. It started with the publication of the booklet '20 Cykellege' (20 Cycling Games eds.), and was followed by the establishment of a team of instructors with special knowledge of how to initiate fun cycling games. With the most recent step of the project, we are establishing local teams in a number of municipalities to spread the concept even further. Six of the cycling games have also been collected in a smaller pamphlet and translated into both English and Portuguese.

In 2011, the cycling game known as 'Obstacle Course' was taken to a new level. A mobile bicycle playground was developed consisting of various challenges such as bumps, seesaw, and much more. Here, the children can play more freely than during the more organized cycling games.

The children get a sense of freedom on the bicycle that they don't get to experience many other places. They get the possibility to challenge themselves and see what they can and cannot do on a bike. The less we adults are there to interfere, the more the children play, and the more they develop their games in completely unexpected directions, all the while becoming more secure cyclists – perhaps even more secure than their parents.

## Cycle safety vs. traffic safety

While you can get far by introducing cycling games, this does not do it alone. At the Danish Cyclists' Federation we differentiate between what we call 'cycle safety' and traffic safety. Cycling games are a great way to achieve cycle safety which means that you can navigate confidently on your bike. But this does not mean that you are 'traffic safe' meaning that you know the rules and know how to handle yourself alongside a passing car for instance. So, once the child has control over the bike, you can start teaching it about traffic rules and practising in traffic. But the basics have to be in order first. Because if you cannot cycle in a straight line, brake, or take one hand off the handlebar, you cannot also concentrate on rules, traffic signals, and other road users.



Children getting 'cyclewise' on the Danish Cyclists' Federation's bicycle playground. A more low-key one can be put together with a box of coloured chalk, pins, and your imagination.

## School cycling

As cycle safety is generally covered by parents, or in some cases nursery schools, Danish schools focus more on teaching children about traffic safety and strengthening their cycling habits. One way to do this is by participating in annual campaigns which set focus on cycling in a way which can be easily incorporated into the classroom.

The Danish Cyclists' Federation's annual campaign, 'Bike to School,' encourages all Danish school children to jump in the saddle two weeks each fall. The concept is quite simple: you have to bike to school as many days as possible during the campaign. You get one point for each 'cycle day,' and if you wear a helmet, you get a point for that too.

Special rules apply for the younger students who are too young to bike to school on their own. Instead, they get points for cycle training with their parents after school hours. In this way, the campaign also encourages families to start cycle training.

150,000 Danish children participated in the 'Bike to School' campaign in 2011.



The strength of the campaign is its being based on the team spirit of the class. The participating classes compete for a number of cool prizes. So the children cheer their classmates on in order for their class to get as many points as possible. One student, Oliver, said that it was too far to bike to school from his mom's house. So he would take the bus to his dad's and bike from there. Now that is team (and cycle) spirit.

Another key feature is that the campaign makes it easy to integrate cycling into the classroom. An extensive catalogue of assignments that teachers can use to integrate the bicycle into their teaching has been developed. For instance, you can combine math and physical education and have the children figure out their fitness rating, or you can practice grammar in a bicycle relay race in the school yard.

'Bike to School' has existed since 2002, and at many schools, the campaign has become a tradition to which students are very dedicated, especially those in middle school. Many municipalities also support the campaign e.g. by sponsoring local prizes and encouraging their schools to participate.

### Teaching traffic safety

In 2006, the decline in the use of bike lights triggered the development of a new campaign aiming to teach fourth-grade students about the importance of using bike lights and reflectors when cycling after dark. Children often start to bike to school on their own around fourth grade, so it is a good time to start teaching them to take responsibility for their own safety.

'Get Your Lights On,' like 'Bike to School,' also uses the classroom to make children curious about cycling. The class teacher receives a kit with lights, reflectors, and assignments for various subjects. In natural science, for instance, the children measure from how far away their lights are visible; they make their own reflectors, and test what happens to batteries if you put them in the freezer.

From the schools' point of view, the two campaigns provide an easy way to cover traffic education. Some may be unsure of how to teach students about traffic or feel that it is not one of their core tasks. But with a ready-to-use catalogue of assignments that also fulfill the requirements of other subjects, teaching traffic education and cycling does not become one more thing that the teacher needs to prepare. Instead, it becomes a helping hand that makes traffic education and cycling fun for students and teachers alike.



The lights and reflectors campaign 'Get Your Lights On' teaches fourth-grade students to take responsibility for their own safety.

### **The parents have got the power**

Cycling games and campaigns are a great way to make children enthusiastic about cycling. But ultimately, a child's cycling habits are very much dependent on its parents who might be unsure of the child's cycling abilities, or whose own transport habits affect those of the child. Busy work schedules and daily commuting can have a heavy impact on the families' transport habits. Cycling games and campaigns might help change this.

A visit to the bicycle playground has served as an eye opener for many parents who have been amazed by their child's wheeling around and taking the challenges at full speed. Not wanting to deny the child the opportunity to help collect points for the class during 'Bike to School,' some might start letting the child bike to school during the campaign.

We still have very little knowledge of how to affect parents in terms of the family's transport habits, but we do have indications that the children's enthusiasm when playing cycling games or participating in a cycle campaign can rub off on their family. Evaluations show many examples of children who have not only changed their own transport habits during the campaign but who have also influenced their parents. One student, Maria, wrote: "I inspired my mother and sister to bike more because I biked to school every day during the campaign."

But how to maintain and strengthen children's bicycle culture and meet the challenge of the families' changing transport habits will stay on the Danish Cyclists' Federation's agenda for many years to come.



A mom lends a helping hand to her daughter who is tackling the 'worm' on the bicycle playground during the UCI Road World Championships in Copenhagen, 2011.

## Where do we begin?

Although they can boast a high number of participants today, the Danish Cyclists' Federation's campaigns and cycle training projects started out as small-scale projects. Only through continuous development over several years have they evolved into what they are today.

So if you are starting more or less from scratch, do not feel discouraged. You do not need an established bicycle playground. Start small. A box of coloured chalk, some pins, or whatever you can find to make your own obstacle course will do the job. Make up your own cycling games. The kids will love it. A 'Bike to School' campaign does not need to start with a grand national concept or with a high-tech website. Start by sending out a cool bike chart where the kids can register the cycle days.

When working with children's cycling, the most important thing is to start early, take the kids' perspective, focus on team spirit, and make cycle training fun!

**Mai-Britt Kristensen**

**Loa Bendix**

mak@dcf.dk

loabendix@gmail.com

**Photo credit:**

The Danish Cyclist' Federation