

## Teaching Meredith Balance

Santa Claus brought Meredith, my daughter, a bicycle. So I began on Christmas afternoon to teach her how to ride it.

I was nervous and excited; here was my chance to really teach someone “balance.” This is the example I’ve heard for years to illustrate something that shifts in an instant but lasts forever, as in “you’ll never forget it: it’s like learning to ride a bicycle!”

Less exciting was the running back and forth in the parking lot of the neighborhood swim club dealing with a seven-year-old’s basic fears.

“Daddy, NO! Don’t let go!”

“Honey, just keep pedaling, you only lose your balance when you stop... oh! See what I mean?”

“I CAN’T do it; I just don’t have confidence like you do!”

As I held the handlebars and trotted alongside, she could feel the way it might be to ride, and she pedaled tentatively at first, then stronger.

By the middle of the first afternoon, she had ridden “solo” for a few short distances with my launching, and was exhilarated. Now she wanted to try going over the speed bumps in the parking lot!

The dueling instincts of fatherhood warred within: Stop her, she’ll get hurt! Let her go, she’s got to learn it herself.

I stayed silent, and she hit the bump, went over it cleanly, stopped pedaling, and crashed. A skinned knee and a scrape on her new black jeans (her greater concern – “let’s not tell Mommy”) became the first scars of learning to ride a bike. I stifled the correction rising in my throat and said simply, “Good job! Are you all right?”

There was a lesson here about riding – keep pedaling and it will stabilize your bike – but the real lesson for me was about teaching. I kept noticing that most of what I felt impelled to say was useless to her. She just needed a steady hand, occasionally, an encouraging word, constantly, and enough space to discover what really worked.

We ended that first session with a successful ride and stop, and walked the bike home.

The second lesson began on a high note, but her early sense of success evaporated when I tried getting her to practice starting from a standstill. She got very discouraged. To give her confidence, I invented the Four Things you have to learn in order to know how to ride a bike: Starting, Riding, Stopping and Turning.

She had shown she knew how to ride (if I got her started), and she was great at stopping. She could do some turning, so, I told her she had already learned 2½ of the 4 things, in only her second day! She proudly recounted that litany to her mother, and her confidence grew.

On the third day, we reached the A-ha! moment. After about 15 minutes of my urging her to practice Starting, I stopped talking. That's when she decided – on her own – to try starting by herself from a stopped position. She got the first pedal down, scrambled a long moment for the second, GOT it... and then the third, fourth, fifth – her jaw dropped open, and then the shout: “Daddy! I did it!”

“That’s what you were talking about!” she exclaimed. “It sure is, honey, it sure is.”

I can’t adequately describe all that was held in that bright little face at that exact moment, in the sharp slanting light of a late December afternoon. Discovery, wonder, thrill, surging confidence – a whole new world of mobility, competence, independence, fun, and adventure.

A quiet place opened in me at that moment. I realized I’d learned something, too, about myself, and about teaching and coaching.

A list of lessons came to mind:

1. Crashing your bike is essential to riding, and teaches more than any amount of talking.
2. Don’t explain why, when someone crashes. Your explanation only distracts them from their own discovery. (Not to mention it’s annoying.)
3. Keep pedaling after you’ve hit a bump in the road, you will regain your balance quickly – if you stop pedaling, you will probably crash.
4. It is important to know how to walk one’s bicycle, before learning to ride. Sometimes walking it gets you through places riding will not.
5. Keep stating the goal – not the way to get there. It didn’t do any good to tell her where to put her feet or how to turn; but saying “come on, ride over here,” got her to do it.
6. Inventing realistic milestones instills confidence. Telling her she’d mastered two of the “Four Things” gave her renewed confidence to continue.
7. Don’t keep going when frustration sets in. Push to the edge, then relent and go back to what’s comfortable, and the student seeks the edge again on her own.
8. Affirmations work, especially when it’s your own idea. She started saying to herself “I know I can do it” (like the little engine) and then she could!
9. You can hold on to the bike for only so long before the new rider wants you to let go.

Gotta go. We have to get in our daily bike ride before the sun goes down.

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