

Columnists

The Baird Facts: Learning to ride a bike ... and to let go

By Esther C. Baird

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BEVERLY, MASS. -

It's a big day here on Prospect Hill: We officially have a 5-year-old who knows how to ride a bike ... without training wheels.

When we first started the process, our daughter was beside herself with excitement. Some of her friends had taken off their training wheels and she couldn't wait to try it herself. So one Saturday we went to the Cove Elementary School for the inaugural first attempt.

Padded-up like a mini-gladiator, our daughter listened seriously to my husband talk about balance and pedaling and looking ahead. We could tell she was thinking it all through ... perhaps a bit too much.

Finally my husband began to run while holding her seat firmly in his hands.

I cheered. "You can do it!! Look ahead! Keep pedaling!"

My husband ran. I jumped. And our daughter timidly pedaled, swerved to the side, and jammed her feet to the ground in a cold stop.

"Ok, good." My husband said encouragingly. "Let's do it again."

And again, and again, and again.

We ended the trip exhausted, with not much to show for it. Still, we oohed and ahed and exclaimed how exciting it all was. But it was clear that our daughter felt gypped. She sat pensively in the car and said she might like to try again ... in a month.

When we next returned to the Cove, I agreed to be the runner. We talked about the wobbling and the pedaling and the looking ahead. We reminded her not to give up, but to keep trying, and to have fun! She smiled, in a focused sort of way, and got on her bike.

I started running while holding her bike, but unlike my husband I wasn't able to hang on ... so I faked it. And she biked.

I began to cheer and scream, "You're doing it! You're biking by yourself!"

My husband began to yell and our 2-year-old cheered from the playground. A family playing soccer in the adjacent field stopped and also began to cheer. Running alongside her, I whooped and yelled, but she only gave me a weak smile. And, after a few bikes up and back with me jogging inches away, straightening her out as needed or catching her when she swerved, she shrugged her shoulders and took off her helmet. She was only mildly pleased.

"Can I play on the playground now?" she asked, and tossed off her helmet and gear.

We took another break ... of another month. Then, this past weekend we decided to try biking at Bradley Palmer State Park on the long paved road. She hopped on her bike and with my husband jogging right alongside her, she biked an impressive 20 feet or so before stopping. She did that for a while, but then gave the familiar shrug and jumped off.

"I think I'll walk for a bit," she said. We exclaimed loudly and triumphantly over her progress, but agreed to stash her bike against a tree until it was time to return.

After a nice family walk full of pinecones and leaf throwing, we turned around. I exclaimed with forced enthusiasm, "Are you ready to bike back?"

Our daughter gave a short nod and walked towards her bike as if it was a chore. It just wasn't fun for her. I wondered what was wrong. What could I do? What should I do?

Suddenly she took off in a sprint and yanked her bike away from the tree. I ran to help her, but without glancing back, she hopped on it and tore down the road. My husband and I stood stunned and watched her bike away. She was fast and strong and whipped down the path. Finally, she came to a stop and turned around with a huge smile on her face. It was the smile of a kid who loved biking.

She turned around and tried to start again but she couldn't get her feet on the pedals. She wobbled and swerved and almost veered into the marsh. But we kept back, watching, until

suddenly her feet caught the pedals. She rode off, just a girl on her bike, having a great time.

At the end, she was tired and thrilled.

"I surprised you, didn't I?" she beamed.

"You sure did! You just took off! Was it great?"

She laughed and nodded with delight. She knew what we as parents had to learn. It had been in her all along to love riding her bike — even if she wobbled and swerved.

She just needed us to stand back and let her go.

Esther Baird is a Beverly writer. Her column appears regularly in the Citizen. Please contact her with suggestions or comments about The Baird Facts at: esther@estherbaird.com, or visit her Web site at: www.estherbaird.com