



# Safety First

*by Molly Hover, for The Bulletin  
Special Projects / photos by Kevin Prieto*

**Cycling to school offers benefits beyond just the physical, but following the rules of the road is a must.**

Bend's beauty lends itself to the outdoors, particularly enjoying the scenery by bicycle. Biking can have an enormous benefit both mentally and physically, especially for kids.

What better way to support this than with a bike ride to school?

Children are sponges to their environments, picking up on subconscious actions and latching onto them. If parents teach their children good exercise habits by example at a young age, children are

more likely to follow suit and continue these habits into adulthood.

What makes bike riding so special? According to [www.parents.com](http://www.parents.com), "Biking is a healthy pastime that kids will never outgrow ... the other benefits of cycling [are]: Developing strength, balance, and overall fitness, burning up calories, [and] strengthening the heart lungs and lower-body muscles and bones."

With these affirmations of the health benefits, the next consideration is bike

safety for children.

Jeremy Nelson, father of two girls ages 10 and 8 who ride bikes to school, agrees that safety is a learning tool as well as a factor in children riding bikes to school alone. The commute for his girls to their elementary school is five blocks with low-traffic streets.

"The rules we give the kids are simple: Directly to school and directly home after. No exceptions," said Nelson.



## TAKE THE Helmet Fit Test

Put your helmet flat on your head. If it moves when you shake your head, you need to tighten your helmet or get a smaller one.

### CHECK THE FOLLOWING:



**EYES:** The helmet should sit low on your forehead — two finger widths above your eyebrows.



**EARS:** With the helmet buckled, the straps should meet just below the ears.



**MOUTH:** When buckled, you should be able to fit no more than two fingers between the buckle and chin.

For more Bicycle Safety tips, visit [www.walkbiketoschool.org/sites/default/files/Parents\\_Bike\\_Safety\\_Tips.pdf](http://www.walkbiketoschool.org/sites/default/files/Parents_Bike_Safety_Tips.pdf)

Nelson believes that the bike ride offers his children necessary freedom and responsibility as well as the opportunity to observe nature that might otherwise be missed during a car ride. Both parents enjoy biking as well and occasionally bike as a family to school, but the girls usually go the short distance themselves.

“The benefit to biking is, of course, being health conscious,” said Nelson, “but it also allows children to develop a sense of independence and self-sufficiency.”

There are many factors in the safety of letting a child bike to school alone: weather, traffic, road conditions, strangers and the very independence that can make it beneficial to children. To decrease the worry, parents can teach some simple tips to their children.

According to [www.walkbiketoschool.org](http://www.walkbiketoschool.org),

the first steps in the process of biking to school should be to check the bike fit, bike visibility and helmet fit. (See “Take the Helmet Fit Test” for proper helmet fitting advice from the National Center for Safe Routes to School.)

Once everything is adjusted appropriately, it’s important for children to understand the rules of the road implicitly.

It’s crucial for kids to understand how to follow the flow of traffic and to know traffic laws. They should recognize the importance of things such as watching out for hazardous material in the street, wearing reflectors or bright clothes as well as knowing the basics of bike riding. A simple way to teach these rules and to practice these skills with children is riding with them on an empty street, in a vacant parking lot or a quiet neighborhood.





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Around Central Oregon, there are quite a few options for bike safety clinics for children including Summer Bike Camp at the Boys and Girls Club of Central Oregon, a Mountain Bike Skills course at Mount Bachelor and a Bicycle Safety Clinic through the Sunriver Police Department.

The free Sunriver clinics are offered throughout the summer on every other Wednesday and are led by two Sunriver Bicycle Patrol Officers whose experience and passion for safety make the program what it is.

"I believe our program gives kids the opportunity to learn about safely operating their bicycle and helps them to get familiar with the signs or rules they may encounter," said Marc Mills, Sunriver Police Department Chief of Police. In fact, children under the age of 16 are required by law to wear a helmet in Oregon.

"To determine if the child is ready to ride to school alone, their understanding of the rules and laws should be observed," said Mills. "We also believe a parent or reliable adult should ride/shadow the child the first few times to school."

Scott McCleary is a fifth grade teacher at Ponderosa Elementary School and is exposed to both children who ride bikes to school and those who do not.

"[There's a] problem with how sedentary kids are. [Bike riding] is better for the environment and kind of teaches them responsibility," he said. "It's a lost art with the phone generation."

At Ponderosa, as well as at many other schools, the traffic during pick-up and drop-off times is one of the biggest complaints parents have. Bike riding can help alleviate that vehicle congestion.

"The biggest concern is safety," said McCleary, adding that most children who attend Ponderosa live nearby so biking to school is a viable option.

The choice to let a child ride their bike to school alone is not one to be taken lightly, but it is a choice that can be made when equipped with safety skills that will have a life-long impact.