

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCERhttp://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/288820_bikeclass16.html**Kids encouraged to get back on their bikes -- safely***Monday, October 16, 2006***By PAUL NYHAN****P-I REPORTER**

Kids used to ride their bicycles until there was no sunlight left in the sky. But traffic, crime fears, more working parents and just plain anxiety have made it harder for kids to pedal down the street.

Now there is a push to get kids back on their bikes. At Seattle-area schools, the Cascade Bicycle Club is arming physical education teachers with fleets of silver Raleigh bicycles and a little expertise to teach kids how to ride safely.

"Things have definitely changed since we were kids," said Kat Sweet, 37, who runs Cascade's Basics of Bicycling program. "A lot of kids actually don't know how to ride bikes. ..."

Lost in Seattle's booming adult bicycling scene is the fact that fewer kids are biking, at least to school. Only 16 percent of kids rode their bikes or walked to school in 2001, a steep drop from 42 percent in 1969, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At Madrona K-8 School, none of the kids in Antonija Ventenbergs' third-grade PE class ride to school, and Friday morning the school bike rack held a single two-wheeler.

So the Cascade Bicycle Club loaned Ventenbergs, known to students as "Miss Toni," 30 bicycles to teach a six-class riding program to first- through fifth-graders.

They learn fast in Miss Toni's class.

Ventenbergs doesn't tolerate any training wheels in the Madrona gymnasium. Instead, kids use their feet to get going and lift their shoes onto the pedals when they are ready.

There are surprisingly few crashes as students race around a makeshift track on the basketball court with the typical exuberance of first-graders.

Few students obey the paper stop signs and traffic light, however. As one rider slows to ask Miss Toni a question, another bumps into her and tumbles to the ground.

During six classes these riders will be taught the rules of the road, intersection etiquette and hand signals.

To help, Miss Toni isn't shy about writing tickets -- paid by sitting on the bench and counting to 100.

Not everyone, though, is ready for the track.

Before the first class, Payten Cole was nervous. The second-grader had her own bike, but she didn't know how to ride it.

**zoom**

Paul Joseph Brown / P-I

Brad Brown, assistant principal at Madrona K-8 School, stops by one of Madrona's bike classes Tuesday, where first-, second- and third-graders are being taught how to safely ride bikes.

By the end of the second class, Payten was rolling carefully around the gym.

Basics of Bicycles teachers hope to cut down on the nearly 285,000 visits that kids made to emergency rooms in 2003, reported by Safe Kids Worldwide.

Children 14 years old and younger are five times more likely to get hurt in bike accidents than older cyclists, Safe Kids said.

Only 41 percent of those kids wear bicycle helmets, even though there are estimates that headgear can prevent 75 percent of fatal head injuries among children, Safe Kids said.

"Head injuries account for only about 5 percent of bicycle accidents ... but they account (for) about two-thirds of fatalities," said Dr. Paul Sherman, a cyclist and doctor at Group Health Cooperative, the lead sponsor of Basics of Bicycling.

Common sense aside, adults and kids are required to wear helmets because it's the law in King County and Seattle.

Miss Toni does her part by promising \$1 to any student she sees riding around the Madrona neighborhood wearing a helmet.

With childhood obesity on the rise, teachers and parents also push bicycling as a way to get kids off the couch and fit.

"It's good exercise," said 8-year-old Delaney Connor, during a break from riding last week.

"If you know how to do it, it's a good thing."

But last year the cycling program needed a tune-up. The bikes often had flat tires or needed work. So the Cascade Bicycle Club took it over from the Seattle School District.

Today, the club maintains five fleets of bicycles that it loans to schools in the Seattle, Lake Washington and Highline school districts.

While the program runs on private funds -- annual operating costs are \$80,000 -- it could use a little help, especially from parents.

"It would be fantastic if we could have the parents come and volunteer for these classes," said Cascade's Sweet.

Having 30 kids on bikes is "lots of responsibility."

GET YOUR KIDS TO RIDE BIKES

- The American Academy of Pediatrics, www.aap.org/family/bicycle.htm
- Cascade Bicycle Club, www.cbcef.org/youth.html, 206- 522-BIKE (3222).

The club also accepts donations for the Basics of Bicycling program.

- Group Health Cooperative, www.ghc.org/cycling

P-I reporter Paul Nyhan can be reached at 206-448-8145 or paulnyhan@seattlepi.com.

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