

SIMPLY THE BEST!

Words & Photos Autumn Barlow



The many benefits of cycling aren't as obvious as you might think. For these keen pedallers, they are positively life-changing...

Helen. Helen. Helen. HELEN!" Lucy almost explodes with impatience as she stands by her trike, waiting for Helen Hines of Simply Cycling. Helen and Sue run this Manchester-based cycling group, and Lucy is desperate to get going.

Lucy's dad Rob is also here. He explains that he and Lucy came here three years ago, and it was the best thing they had ever done. "She does 20 miles on her trike now, or with me on a tandem." That's impressive, but he says it's not about the bike — or, at least, the bike was just the start. "She's more social now. It has empowered her because she helps make drinks,

and she interacts more."

Lucy has autism, one symptom of which is shying away from contact and communication, feeling inhibited by sensory overload. I'm worried Lucy's going to burst if Helen doesn't respond to her cries, and I step back to watch them zoom off around the track at Longford Park. I'm almost overwhelmed by the variety of bicycles. This group reaches out to 600 people and it's just one example of the many organisations nationwide that run on grants and fund-raising, tirelessly promoting cycling for everyone.

I'm here because James, my stepson, has autism. He likes shiny lights, ringing bells, and things that

spin — so the sight of me cycling sends him into spasms of delight. I was convinced that learning to ride a bike was an essential life skill, like coping in shops and being able to make a sandwich, and I assumed that we'd teach him as he got older. It didn't go to plan.

James can keep his balance, and he's beginning to understand braking, but he prefers to tip the bike upside-down and spin the wheels. I read all the usual how-to-teach-your-child-to-ride advice and it simply didn't address the difference. So what is a

OVERCOME YOUR FEARS

How you can help your child to ride

Fear of failure

It's a natural fear, especially when your child struggles with day-to-day things. Many parents and carers set their children only achievable tasks, often rigged to enable the child to succeed without pain. The problem comes when the child is held back from trying just in case they fail. Do you hear yourself saying, "Oh, we tried but Johnny can't keep his balance"? Maybe he couldn't last month or last week or yesterday, but don't let your assumptions blind you to the brand new possibilities of now.

And the message of all-ability cycling is clear: there is a bike for everyone. Have I said that enough times?

Fear of roads

My husband's particular fear for James concerned riding on the road. James has no sense of fear and a reduced spatial awareness, and his tendency to be overwhelmed with information would be a hazard in noisy, fast-moving traffic. In a way, this was another fear of failure on our part. Why tempt a child with a treat, then tell them they can't have it?

It's simple. Parks, paths, trail centres — there are plenty of adults who won't ride on roads, and let's focus on what he can do, not what he can't.

Fear of accidents

This is the big one.

Because your child has physical difficulties, it'd be irresponsible, you fear, to shove them onto a bicycle and whizz them down a hill? It's scary for anyone

to teach their child to ride a bike, especially that first time you let go and they tumble over and bleed and cry, and you feel like a terrible ogre. Here, it comes down to knowing your child and giving them the same opportunities — using adaptations — as any other child.

CONTACT INFO

Simply Cycling
www.simply-cycling.org

Cycling Projects
www.cycling.org.uk

James is a visual learner. He has never seen me on a bike in anything less than helmet, head-to-foot reflective clothing, and gloves. So, to him, it's normal, and he didn't protest at having to wear his own helmet.

Fear of expense

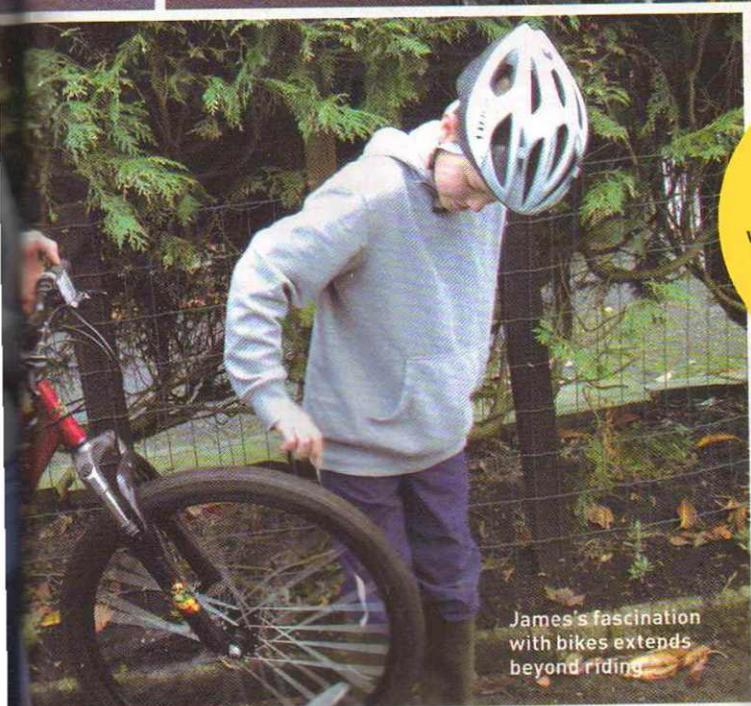
Here the advantage of an all-ability cycling group is clear. You can ride together on adapted bikes, and you don't have the fuss of storing or transporting an ungainly trike, never mind the expense of buying one.



Gregor, Adam and Peter get ready to roll!



Jamie combines cycling with looking after Randall — so both can enjoy the benefits



James's fascination with bikes extends beyond riding

MANDY'S STORY

Road to recovery

Mandy's sons Cain and Fynn both have additional needs of varying severity. Cain, now 11, had a series of strokes when he was three, which initially left him paralysed down the left side, with no speech; he was mentally reverted to being a baby again, temporarily. He had to relearn to do everything, and now wears a leg brace. Academically, he's caught up, but emotionally he still struggles.

"From a very early age, we travelled by bike. The boys had a sit-in trailer that I towed everywhere, but as they got older it was too heavy. It seemed obvious Cain would not be able to ride a bike, so I purchased a Pashley UPlus2 trailer bike. We used a toe strap to hold Cain's left foot on the pedal; he couldn't put much effort in, but with mine and Fynn's combined pedalling, we flew round," says Mandy.

Soon, Fynn was riding independently, but it was thought Cain's left leg would always hold him back. "We bought a Pashley Pickle trike for Cain to try to ride, but he couldn't make a full rotation with his left, so after several attempts he refused and we just used a Mission Piggyback I bought from eBay. After almost five years, it was becoming harder for me to tow, as my knees were suffering! Hills were a no-no and I would have to get off and haul the whole lot up!"

Something had to change, and Mandy began looking at buying a specially adapted bike for Cain. However, the two-grand price-tag meant she had to start planning some fund-raising, but then something unexpected happened.

"On a trip to my LBS, there was a huge commotion. I could hear Fynn and Cain screaming, and suddenly Cain came round the corner on a teeny child's bike with stabilisers. He was actually pedalling, doing a full 360° rotation. I just remember bursting into tears at the sight!"

Apparently, several years of being on a trailer bike, having his foot strapped in, had helped rebuild muscles. Mandy continues: "The next day I received a call from our local newspaper, saying we had been nominated to their appeal fund the Argus Appeal by Rod, the owner of the bike shop, Giant Shoreham.

"After a lengthy discussion, it was decided that Cain didn't need a trike or a special disability bike and that Rod and his staff would build Cain an electric bike. The only problem was balance, so the local engineering college offered to help. They set their students the task of designing a stabiliser unit, and the best design won."



Cain's strength and confidence have both been rebuilt

Making a machine that suits the rider's needs produces smiles like Lucy's

"She does 20 miles on her trike. It has empowered her and she interacts more"



family to do when a child has additional needs?

A government Green Paper (2011) claimed that 21 per cent of school children have a special or additional need. This covers everything: children with behavioural issues, physical disabilities, mental health issues, mental difficulties or delays, both in mainstream education and alternative provision.

Helen says Simply Cycling's purpose is "to get everyone cycling — we're all-ability." It's a straightforward, can-do approach and when I gaze at the handcycles, trikes, cargo bikes, and tagalongs, I have a revelation. I had been too focused on getting James to ride a proper bike — I should have been asking, "what bike is best for James?" What is a 'proper' bike, anyway?

There's no barrier to cycling. Randall glides past powering a bike that's carrying a wheelchair on the front, in which Jamie is wrapped in a blanket. His father was a cyclist. So is Jamie. It's an advantage to be on a flat, traffic-free track, though the cyclists can take off around the park too. Being away from cars, and from judgemental peer groups, is helpful. Children who wouldn't cycle at home have their confidence restored here.

Lis Hunter, who volunteers with another north-west group, Cycling Projects, agrees. Her group has access to indoor facilities, and she tells me



Trikes with adapted parts are the most popular bikes

about the little things that can make a big difference, such as a footplate to keep feet on the pedals, or a raised back support.

My eyes have been opened. I wanted to teach James to ride a bike properly, but I've been doing it wrong. Teaching a child with special needs is about making the connection between ability and adaptation, and looking for what that child can do.

How do you find a group like this? There's no national network. Local authorities may be aware of these organisations but may not have all the details. It's a case of internet searching and asking around, and 'all-ability cycling' is a useful term. Many people, like Rob and Lucy, came across this group by chance. Get on to the internet to find your nearest group. **End**