

Is there a place for balance bikes in ECE centres?

By Amanda Davies



Balance bikes are becoming increasingly popular amongst New Zealand preschoolers and their parents, but do they have a place in early childhood education? After seeing the benefits with my own children and others, I say absolutely. Some may say I'm biased, so it is worth considering the story of Ian.

Ian (23 months) had been observing others in his centre riding balance bikes. If a balance bike was lying on the ground, he would go over to it and spin its wheels. Eventually he gained the courage to pick up a bike and walk beside it while pushing it around. Over a number of weeks Ian continued to push the bike around the playground. Although his teachers encouraged him to sit on the bike he refused until, in his own time, Ian built up the skills and confidence to sit on the bike and propel himself around. Ian had observed others, set his own goals and persisted until he was able to achieve them by himself.

He was able to experience an environment where he could gain confidence in and control of his body while also discovering that he could participate and take risks without fear of harm. (Te Whāriki)

Balance bikes allow children to discover balance and steering control in their own time and comfort zone. Coordination, balance, agility and spatial awareness develop as the child plays.

As the skills and confidence of the child grow they find ways to make the bike travel faster and search for variations in terrain to provide further challenges. This provides an opportunity for risk taking and allows children to assess the likelihood of success or failure with regard to their own abilities. Being able to experience this within their own boundaries teaches the child resilience and provides them with a basis to develop responsible attitudes towards future judgments of risk.

What does a Centre Director have to say?

"Our balance bikes have become one of the most popular physical play resources in the centre. We have observed children who are normally reticent in mastering new physical skills dramatically grow in confidence and derive great satisfaction from being able to ride these bikes. And that is just the beginning – the bikes provide a springboard for all sorts of other learning, including language and social skills."

Eric Hollis, The Ole Schoolhouse, Rotorua.

With so many different balance bikes available on the retail market it is important to consider what each bike is offering and if they meet the needs of your children and environment. Some key things to consider when purchasing balance bikes are:

- Weight – Choosing a bike that is lightweight is important with this age group. If a bike is too heavy and awkward for a small child to easily pick up they will quickly lose interest and move on to something else.
- What age group range are you catering too? Generally balance bikes are suited to children between 2 and 5 years old. Children as young as 18 months can start to ride a balance bike if the bike is small enough for them to stand over and manoeuvre. If you are considering a balance bike for 'under two's' choose a bike that is designed specifically for this age group.
- Frame shape – Ensure a child can sit on the seat and easily reach the handle bars without having to stretch too far forward. Choose a bike with a seat height lower than the inner leg length of the children. A model with easy seat height adjustment will mean the bike can be used by a wider range of ages, otherwise consider getting bikes of two different sizes.
- Durability – Ask specific questions about the materials the bikes are made of. A bike made of high quality materials that are resistant to warping and corrosion will last much longer in an ECE centre setting. Also consider how easily you can get spare parts.
- Safety features – Look for a bike with a mechanism to prevent the handle bars from steering too far and covers on sharp edges to minimise the risk of injury.
- Available space and surfaces – Outdoor space on a firm to hard surface is best. Any area that can be utilised as a loop circuit with changes in grade and surface is ideal.
- Helmets are a must! Look for a reputable brand that is easily adjustable and infant or preschooler specific so they can be easily fitted correctly to each child.



For more information about balance bikes go to: www.likeabike.co.nz