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Bicycle Education

There is no debate whether bikes are used as a means of transportation more in Europe or America. Europeans use bicycles frequently for everyday tasks such as going to school, work, shopping, running errands, etc, while Americans will get into their cars to go across the street. Part of this general trend can be attributed to the education, or lack of, for bicycle riding. If children are not taught how to use a bicycle for transportation, and are even made scared of it, then they will not use it as adults. The education and attitude for bike riding is very different on the two continents. In many countries in Europe, bicycle riding is a taught subject in school, while in America it is not, and sometimes it is even prohibited.

Generally, American school children do not ride bikes to school because of their parents' fear of getting into an accident and fear of being abducted. Parents feel that children are much safer when they are driven to school than if they were to take a bike, though statistically there is an equal chance of being injured (provelo.org). One out of 10 kids gets to school somehow other than using motor transport ([Appleyard](#)). Some schools go so far that they do not allow children to ride bikes, claiming that it is a liability. Schools that do not want to set a ban, simply remove bike racks and claim there is no place to safely store bikes ([Moran](#)). Teachers in some of these school districts are not allowed to ride a bike either, because they are supposed to lead by example (bikeforums.net [ofofhy](#)). Bicycle education in school is rare and usually left to the parents, and they simply load the kids into the car.

In most schools the only advice kids are given about riding the bike is to wear a helmet. The usage of a helmet is stressed and even is a rule in some cities. It is good to wear a helmet, but this type of education is not preventative for accidents, but rather protective of when an accident happens. Often teachers tell children to ride on sidewalks and be scared of traffic, both of which are a hazard to proper riding. Bicycle education is so lacking because it is primarily taught by untrained authority figures (Oswald). Too frequently, bicycles are viewed as a toy and sports equipment and not a mode of transportation and children are told to use them in their backyard and in parks. A bicycle is a vehicle, no less as a car, and therefore should have equal training. Sixteen year olds have to study and take a test before they can drive a car, so why shouldn't elementary school children also study to ride a bicycle? The lack of education increases the risk of accidents to bike riders.

There are more than 600 deaths in America of bike riders and about 540,000 go to the emergency room every year (bhsi.org). U.S. cyclists are three times more likely to be killed than German cyclists and six times more than Dutch (Bluejay). This is due to many factors such as bike paths along the roads, drivers being more respecting of bikers, and education, the latter being the most overlooked. It is easier to blame heavy traffic and careless drivers, and simply keep children off the roads than to educate them.

In many countries in Europe, such as Germany, Bicycling is a taught subject in school just like history and math. It is usually taught throughout a four week period in the fourth grade and students have to pass an examination in bicycle safety (Ed.gov). This course goes far beyond the importance of a helmet, and extensively teaches road signs, turning, and sharing the road. Children learn to read and follow road signs, who

has the right of way in different situations, how to ride properly, and when to push the bike. They have classroom taught lessons, in which they take notes, and hands on lessons, and are taught by both the class teacher and a professional.

Frequently they go to bicycle driving schools or traffic playgrounds. These are areas that look like mini roads with signs and everything, but only for bikes, and children learn how to maneuver around this area first before going to the real roads (Kwg). The traffic playgrounds provide educational material such as videos, handouts, bikes, and helmets. This is not only educational for children, but also fun and if they are having a good time they become motivated and excited about riding. After they complete the course they often go on a biking excursion with their teacher. Similar education and Traffic playgrounds are found in various European countries, such as in Holland, but they use toy cars. Nevertheless, the child still learns similar concepts about following traffic laws, while having a good time.



(Traffic Park in Slovakia)



(Traffic Park in the Netherlands)

There are other ways German children are educated in biking, for instance, there are interactive games online which teach children the important parts of a bicycle,

behavior in traffic, and correct turning. One such activity can be found here:

<http://www.br-online.de/wissen-bildung/collegeradio/spezial/beitraege/faflitz/>. Also, children are taught road safety different ways. For example, when they buy a pencil case, a leaflet on which they can write their school schedule has road signs pictured on the back.

In the Netherlands, bike riding is very popular, so children grow up riding bikes and most are taught by their parents, and in fourth grade already travel to and from school by bike regularly. Nevertheless, they also have traffic lessons as part of their school curriculum. A bike safety organization supplies every school with information and instructions to arrange all the bicycle education, so every child gets the same education. First, the students study traffic signs and rules and take a written test. Then, they have their bicycle inspected; if it does not pass they have to get it fixed and turn it in for inspection again. Then there is also a practical test, where the children have to bike on a specific route through town and instructors stand in several locations and see if they ride correctly meaning if they signal directions with their hands, follow traffic signs etc. The children practice this route before hand so they are familiar with it and know what they are doing (Hermans). This process very much resembles the one to get a driver's license in the States.

Some schools in the Netherlands also participate in a program called bicycle pools or fietspoolen. This program organizes groups of small children to be able to go to and from school on bicycles in groups accompanied by an adult. This program was started to reduce the number of cars transporting children to school, because parents were too scared to let their young ones bike to school alone. The program provides a safe

environment for transportation since they travel in a group, wear helmets and bright vests, which are provided, and are accompanied by an experienced rider. Cars will most likely slow down when they pass by a group of small children in bright colors [AS](#) opposed to one child riding by himself/herself. Not only does the program provide safety, but also teaches the kids how to ride properly. The accompanying adult is trained in safety and education and the children learn how to follow road signs and share the road ([west-vlaanderen.be](#)).



Some organizations and schools in the U.S. understand the importance of bicycle education for children and there are programs in the U.S., though they are rare. The Vermont Bicycle and Pedestrian Coalition has an education program called BikeSmart designed for elementary schools. Instructors give a free 45min-1 hour presentations to assemblies. This is better than nothing but it provides no hands on experience and it cannot go into depths on road signs and road use. The coalition also can help schools set up a bicycle safety fair which is similar to the traffic parks and bike schools in Europe ([Vtbikeped](#)). The idea is there, but schools and educators may be turned off because of the vast amount of planning, expenses, and time involved with the event.



(VT BikeSmart)

The lack of time spent on the education is also a problem. Children will not retain the information from a short assembly or talk, but that is exactly what schools do. In Santa Cruz County the Community Traffic Safety Coalition gives talks to elementary schools. The pedestrian safety curriculum consists of a 25-minute program for grades K-2, and the bicycle safety curriculum consists of a 40-minute program for grades 3-5 (ci.santa-cruz.ca). This cannot be compared to the four weeks of practice in Germany.

There are programs which are well designed but they are not necessarily implemented. The North Carolina Department of Transportation Bicycle Program made a curriculum for elementary level bicycle education. It includes seven 40 minute class periods, during which two are lectures and five are hands on biking. It sounds very promising, but the school needs to provide bicycles, helmets, spare parts, traffic signs, etc. (it is a very lengthy list). Teachers would need to take their own time to learn the material and prepare the lessons (ces.ncsu.edu). It seems that schools would not want to spend the time, money and effort in this course when it is not mandated by the state.

A program which seems promising is in Florida, the Florida Traffic & Bicycle Safety Education Program, which is part of the Department of Urban & Regional Planning of the University of Florida. It has developed a program to incorporate bicycle education into the school curriculum. They aim to educate teachers, law enforcers, and

other school officials on bike safety and proper usage of bikes. This way the schools will have the resources to educate the children and will not need to hire outside professionals to give a lecture which is costly. The cost of outside programs often hinders the school from providing proper bicycle education. The University program is funded by the Florida Department of Transportation and therefore does not charge the school for its services. It began in 1982 and continues to today. The workshops include a ten-hour, one-and-half day, workshop for school teachers and an eight-hour workshop for community trainers. Their goal is to educate teachers in three schools a year (UFL).

Some cities in America realize the benefits of walking and bicycling to school and try to make it safer through safe route to school programs. This helps design the surrounding area of the school to be more pedestrian friendly and is modeled after Canadian and European planning. It has been successfully done in The Bronx, New York City (Appleyard). Though this program is good for encouraging bicycling, it does not eliminate the need for education.

Whoever uses the road should be familiar with and obey the rules to maximize safety. Somehow this is overlooked in America and people young and old know how to ride a bike physically, but not practically. Many cyclists believe that traffic rules do not apply to them. That is why cycling in America is too dangerous and difficult, because people don't know how to cycle (Kifer). Education works in two ways, not only do people learn how to ride on the street, but when they drive they know how to respect cyclists and understand that they have fair use of the road, which people here do not believe. The education system for bike riding is drastically opposite here and in Europe and this accounts for the lack of and negative thinking towards bicycling.

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