

## Time to revisit New Zealand Cycle Safety

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Cycling is a fun, healthy activity and growing numbers of people are buying bikes and encouraging children to cycle. Cycling can also be deadly, especially when child cyclists mix with traffic. It is time we looked again at official advice applying to children on bikes.

Over one quarter of all serious cycling injuries happen to children under the age of fifteen<sup>1</sup>. Internationally, serious injuries for child cyclists peak at ages 10 to 13 years.

New Zealand's child cycling crash numbers are high by international standards, and increasing<sup>2, 3</sup>. Over five years, child (0 to 14 years) cyclist crashes that involved motor vehicles numbered 250 injuries and 22 deaths. During the same time crashes that did not involve a motor vehicle resulted in the hospital admissions of 2,528 child cyclists, and one death<sup>4</sup>.

Two very separate sets of skills are required for safe cycling. One is riding the bike; the other involves understanding road rules and safely negotiating traffic.

Best practice acknowledges cyclists on roads must be able to understand and apply road rules. While it might be reasonable to say some children can start cycling on quiet roads at ages ten or eleven, the evidence suggests the majority of children will not be ready to ride in usual urban traffic until they are much older, about the same time we begin to consider them old enough to drive a car<sup>5</sup>.

This is problematic because many children have the physical skills to ride a bike at a much earlier age. When their local roads are used by large numbers of cars, and clearly unsafe, they have nowhere to cycle.

In response an increasing number of children, and their parents, ride on footpaths.

People riding on footpaths are balancing the danger of colliding with a car driving in or out of a driveway against the danger of riding on the road. It is an uneasy choice.

This also contravenes the New Zealand Road Code, which prohibits riding on footpaths except when a cyclist is delivering information to letterboxes or when the footpath is a designated cycleway<sup>6</sup>.

Overseas jurisdictions (such as South Australia and Queensland) allow children under the age of twelve to ride on footpaths with an accompanying adult. Because the majority

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<sup>1</sup> Cycling Fact Sheet. Auckland, Safekids NZ: 2007.

<sup>2</sup> How exposure information can enhance our understanding of child traffic 'death leagues' Christie et al, Injury Prev. Vol. 13, 125-129, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Transport, NZ Government; Cycling Crash Fact Sheet. 2007

<sup>4</sup> Cycling Fact Sheet. Auckland, Safekids NZ: 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Barton, B. Integrating selective attention into developmental pedestrian safety research. Canadian Psychology. August 2006, Vol. 47, no. 3, 203-210.

<sup>6</sup> The official New Zealand Road Code. Wellington, Land Transport: 2007

of serious crashes happen when child cyclists choose to leave the footpath and merge with traffic, this rule is accompanied with safety messages about always stopping before entering roads or crossings. Bells and cycling speed limits also assist in avoiding crashes with pedestrians<sup>7</sup>.

Designating suitable footpaths as cycle ways creates safer cycling places, yet within our cities and towns this solution is happening much slower than the appeal for cycling is growing. There many good reasons for children to cycle, but 'off road' cycle routes are rare and cycling has been shown to be the riskiest method of travelling to school<sup>8</sup>.

So how old should children be before they can ride their bikes on the road? Should they ride on some roads, and not others? What about speed limits and bells for cycles? Many seemingly suitable footpaths are not designated as cycle ways, should children be told to break the law and ride on them?

At a time when more children are being encouraged to cycle we need clear, unambiguous safety messages for families. Most importantly, these messages need to be based on research about our own, New Zealand, cycling and road environments.

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<sup>7</sup> Queensland Injury Surveillance Unit Injury Bulletin. No 86, April, 2005

<sup>8</sup> Schofield GM, et al The incidence of injuries travelling to and from school by travel mode. *Prev. Med.*, 2007 doi:10.1016/j.jpemed.2007.09.002