

GROUP TEST

# BALANCE BIKES

*A pedal-less bike is an ideal introduction to cycling – and a great Christmas present. CTC's **Victoria Hazael** and son Noah (3) test four*

**BALANCE BIKES** are small starter bicycles for pre-school children. Like the original bicycle, the 'running machine' of Baron Karl von Drais, they lack pedals: the rider scoots along the ground, pushing off with alternate feet, and can lift both to coast.

Using a balance bike teaches a child the skills that make bicycling possible: balancing and steering. Many also come with a brake. Pedalling might seem a fundamental skill but is easily incorporated later. A child who starts on a bike with stabilisers will need to learn the more difficult skill of balancing later, and older children may get scared when the stabilisers are taken away. If you'd like more information about teaching a child to ride a bike, watch CTC's short video: [ctc.org.uk/guide/teach-child-ride-bike](http://ctc.org.uk/guide/teach-child-ride-bike).

Finally, a warning: like any bike, a balance bike needs to be checked by a competent cycle mechanic before use. Two here had significant assembly faults.

## WEIGHT

The lighter the better. For a three year old child weighing 16kg, the 1.6kg difference between the lightest and heaviest bike here is 10% of their bodyweight. Imagine if your bike were 6-8kg heavier! Also, you will end up carrying a balance bike a lot, possibly all the way home from the park...



## SEATING

Look for a comfortable and slightly concave saddle to prevent your child from slipping forward. Adjust the saddle height so that your child can put both feet flat on the floor, raising it as he or she grows. A footplate or rest is useful to stop legs flailing during extended coasting.

## YOUR THOUGHTS?

**WRITE TO US:** Cycle Letters, CTC, Parklands, Railton Road, Guildford GU2 9JX

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## STEERING

A headset with ball bearings will enable the handlebar to turn easily and freely, unlike a plain bearing. Some balance bikes have a steering damper or stop to prevent jack-knifing. Handgrips must be secure. Bulb-ended grips can stop hands slipping off and prevent injury in a fall.

## BRAKE

Shoe soles will stop a balance bike at moderate speeds, but a hand-brake is a useful extra, especially for children who like to whizz around. It also teaches a skill that will be needed later. Make sure your child can actually pull the brake lever: too stiff or too big will only teach them that brakes are useless!

## WHEELS

Pneumatic tyres are lighter, more comfortable and roll better, especially over bumps. All the bikes tested have 12-inch (ISO 203) wheels. The wheels themselves should spin easily and freely, which they'll do best with (correctly adjusted!) ball bearings.



### 1) ISLABIKES ROTHAN

£129.99 [islabikes.co.uk](http://islabikes.co.uk)

This was our top choice, and not just because Noah's favourite colour is green! It's a well-built, aluminium-framed bike that's lightweight at just 3.6kg. It has the only brake lever my son and all his friends could pull with ease, and has handlebars and grips that are about 20% thinner than the others – perfect for little hands. Nice touches are the steering stop (so the handlebar won't twist all the way round) and the dome axle nuts on the wheel nuts, which minimise the risk of scrapes. It's suitable for smaller children than many balance bikes; ages two and up is a realistic claim. Conversely, maximum saddle height is just 39cm, so you may need the optional long seatpost (+5cm) for bigger riders. The seatpost doesn't have a quick release, so it takes longer to adjust when friends want a go but does mean your child can't remove the saddle when playing 'bike mechanics'... Noah's verdict: 'I like the brake, I can lift it up over a step – but where's the bell?'

● **Lightweight, well proportioned, with an effective brake. Best on test**



### 2) KOKUA LIKEABIKE JUMPER

£154.95 [likeabike.co.uk](http://likeabike.co.uk)

This all-aluminium bike is the lightest here at 3.4kg. It's really good on bumpy ground as it has rear suspension, using an elastomer. Noah liked to bounce up and down on it. It's well designed, with foot rests for coasting and a removable rubber steering damper to stop the handlebar jerking round. The protective neoprene stem cover to soften the blow if your child slips forward is nice, although it is easily removed and lost by small helpers. The wheels have axle nut covers and Schwalbe Big Apple tyres. It has the lowest initial maximum saddle height of the bikes we tested, so suits two and three year olds, but comes with two seatposts to extend the life of the bike. The only downside is that there's no brake. A front brake (£22) is an optional extra. Noah's verdict: 'It is shiny and bouncy, but



where's the brake?'

● **Very light. Suspension improves comfort and handling, but a brake costs extra**

### 3) CARRERA COAST

£59.99 (RRP £110.99)

[halfords.com](http://halfords.com)

The large saddle made this reasonably big balance bike easier to get on and stay on. It has the non-cyclist parent in mind, with painted lines on the maximum handlebar height. It also helps children to know where to put their feet when scooting by having non-slip tape just in front of the rear wheel. There is a mudguard to stop feet/shoelaces getting caught in the wheel. The rear wheel's band brake is effective but not easy to pull. It is the second heaviest bike at 4.5kg and has a saddle height of 38cm-plus. It's not a bad bike in itself but the assembly was poor: the front wheel bearings were horribly loose. Noah's verdict: 'It is big, fast and I like the wheel cover [mudguard!].'

● **At £60, it's good value. Better suited to bigger pre-school kids**



### 4) RIDGEBACK SCOOT

£99.99 [ridgeback.co.uk](http://ridgeback.co.uk)

The heaviest bike here at just over 5kg, this comes with two seat posts and the highest handlebar height, so your child can keep riding it for longer. The grips are big and squishy so are nice and safe if a child gets a handlebar in the belly, although the grips themselves are easily damaged. The Scoot's brake – a V-brake – is the most difficult to pull; Noah sometimes used both hands on it! There is no steering stop and the axle nuts stick out a long way. The test bike had loose bearings in the front hub. Worse, the headset was wrongly assembled, with two sets of balls in the bottom bearing and none at the top! Overall, it is a longer and bigger bike more suitable for larger children. It was the only bike that came with a bell – the only thing that made it popular with Noah's friends. Noah's verdict: 'It has a bell, I can't do the brake... Did you know I can take the saddle off?'

● **Stiff brake. Relatively heavy. Suits bigger three year olds plus**