

family cycling





Starting a family doesn't mean that you have to stop cycling. There is a wide range of options for getting your whole family pedalling. Having children might even be an inspiration to think more about the kind of world you want for them, and whether cars should play such a dominant role in that world, given their contribution to asthma-inducing pollution, global warming and the shrinking of safe places for kids to play.

By far the easiest, cheapest and most common solution to getting small children on a bike is the **child-seat**. Usually mounted on a rear pannier-rack, these are quick and easy to fit and are fine for children as soon as their necks are strong enough to hold up their heads and cope with the wobbling, which can be as young as 6 months. A rear-mounted seat should fit up to the age of about 4½, whilst front mounted seats might be outgrown by 3½. Front mounted seats can, however, be a little more stable as the child's weight is more firmly between the wheels. You'll also find it easier to talk to your child when they are in front of you, but if the seat is mounted on the top-tube of your frame you may find that they get in the way of your knees and make pedalling a little more awkward. A rear mounted seat, on the other hand, means you can't use regular panniers, so carrying shopping, or even spare nappies etc, can be a bit tricky. As is often the case, the best bet is to try before you buy and make sure that whatever you get is compatible with your bike. If in any doubt, have it fitted at your local bike-shop. Expect to pay anywhere between £30 and £120, depending on quality and whether you need a special rack to fit it. Reclining seats can offer more comfort, particularly for younger children in rear-mounted seats. Whatever you choose, make sure you do a test ride with a bag of potatoes in the seat before riding with a child, just to get used to the extra weight! It is also worth remembering that whilst you might feel quite warm while cycling, even in the cold, your child isn't doing any work and will need wrapping up warm to protect them from the wind and cold.

A popular, more versatile, alternative to seats is the **trailer**. Available for either one or two children, a trailer can cope with a growing family and with a specially fitted sling some can take children as young as 3 weeks old; it's quite possible to squeeze a 6 or even 7 year old into a trailer along with a younger sibling and still have room for shopping in the back. The main problem will be towing it up the hills! Some of the more versatile trailers can also be converted into strollers, so once you reach your destination you can push the trailer around like a pram. Trailers do have a couple of disadvantages though. You will need somewhere to store them and although most will fold down fairly small, having to do this each time can be inconvenient.

Trailers are also wider on the road, so some cycle paths can be impractical, particularly if they have barriers to prevent motorcycles using them. The extra size also means that they take a little getting used to when you first ride with them. As with a child-seat, it is worth practising with a small sack of potatoes before loading up the kids. The extra size does mean that you are usually given a wider berth by passing cars, however, so there are advantages. For a new trailer you can pay anything from £60 to £500, depending on build quality and extras like suspension and stroller attachments but there are many second-hand bargains around. Buy spare hitches when you buy the trailer if you want to use it with more than one bike.

	 Pros	 Cons
Child seat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy & quick to fit and remove • Small and easy to store • Can ride the bike as normal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposed to the weather • Can't be used with regular panniers
Trailer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can carry kids, shopping, tents, toys etc. • Protected from cold and rain • Easy to attach to a number of bikes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bulky and may need a garage or shed to store • Wider than normal so limits cycle-path use

Some Pros & Cons

Once your children are about 4-5 years old, they'll probably want a bit more independence and you'll probably want them to start pulling their weight a bit. At this age children are big enough to ride a **tagalong** or a **tandem**. There are many **child-back tandems** available and they can often be found quite cheap second-hand through the websites of the Tandem Club (www.tandem-club.org.uk) and the Cycle Touring Club (www.ctc.org.uk). More versatile and easier to store is a tagalong. A tagalong is like a child's bike with the front wheel replaced by a hitch which attaches it to the back of an adult's bike. The best tagalongs attach to the rear rack which gives much more stability than a seat-post mounting. Many also have independent brakes and gears, so your child is getting used to basic bike controls.

Either a tandem or a tagalong will give your child a chance to feel how a bike handles and balances, so makes it easier for them to learn to ride their own bike. You will, however, need to be careful with younger children to ensure that they don't fall asleep and fall off. Toe-clips can help with this, and you can get seat-backs that allow you to strap your child in, but the best measure is to keep within your child's limits and not go for really long rides without having lots of stops to rest and plenty of snacks to keep them going.

Whatever system you choose, it is easy to keep even a large family cycling. As well as keeping fit, enjoying yourself and introducing your kids to the pleasure of riding a bike, you're also helping to reduce carbon emissions and making the world a safer place for them. Before you know it, they'll be wanting their own bike and racing off while you struggle to keep up!