

Some parents are outsourcing this rite of childhood

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By Beth Teitell Globe Staff June 01, 2016



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Somerville MA 5/30/16 Susan McLucas (cq) teaching Markus Mauer (cq), 5, how to ride a bike at the Powder House Community School on Monday May 30, 2016. Today was Mauer's first time riding a bike without training wheels and was riding solo within 15 minutes. (Photo by Matthew J. Lee/Globe staff)
topic: reporter:

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By her own admission, when Joanna Lydgate heard there was a woman in Somerville who gives kids bike-riding lessons, this is what she thought: “That seems like a total racket. I can teach my own kid to ride a bike.”

Then Lydgate remembered that she and her husband had in fact already tried to teach their 5-year-old to ride, on multiple occasions, and that tears — not a life skill — had come of it. Suddenly, hiring someone else to do the teaching didn't seem so wrong.

In the nation's collective nostalgia, learning to ride a bike is a rite of childhood, a parent-child bonding experience, with mom or dad running behind the bike, holding onto the seat, and yelling, “keep pedaling!” as Junior wobbles to independence.

But now some parents are outsourcing the job — and a growing number of businesses are eager to help.

Kiddie bike lessons are increasingly popular at [Landry's Bicycles](#), particularly the Newton and Westborough locations, said Galen Mook, the company's marketing and advocacy associate. Private lessons go for \$80. Group

lessons are less.

“Having someone with patience, who’s done it before [is helpful],” Mook said.

Richard Fries, executive director of [MassBike](#), an advocacy organization, says his group has gotten many requests for children’s lessons, too.

It’s the same story in Brookline, where LeRoy Watkins III, the owner of MyBike and the [Viking Activity Center](#) playspace, is trying to figure out a way to meet the demand.

Some parents seek teaching help because they don’t know how to ride a bike themselves. Others are too busy. Many can’t take the whining.

In Somerville, Lydgate was thrilled to stand by and watch as Susan McLucas — a grandmotherly woman with the world’s calmest vibe — taught Lydgate’s daughter, Marina, to ride a bike in 45 emotion-free minutes.

“I didn’t have to be implicated in any way,” she said.

Thirty one years ago, when McLucas started the [Bicycle Riding School](#), out of a ramshackle barn behind her Davis Square house, her intention was to help “the poor adults who spend their whole life not knowing how to ride.”

But along the way she taught a kid or two, and word spread from one parent to another. Now, demand has grown to the point where the kids have squeezed out the grownups, and McLucas needs to hire another teacher. (She already has one working for her.)

McLucas starts kids coasting down a very gentle slope so they can learn to balance and then teaches them to pedal — sometimes with her in tow, holding them up with a harness.

“It’s good for them, but bad for my 67-year-old back,” she said.

McLucas charges \$10 to \$30 per child for a group lesson, and \$25 to \$60 for a private class. As you might expect from someone who planted a Bernie Sanders sign on her lawn (until it somehow disappeared) and who works as a peace and women’s health activist, she lets people decide how much they want to pay. Most kids need three or four classes, she said.

Despite the current popularity of biking, Fries, of MassBike, attributes the demand in part to a surprisingly high percentage of young parents who themselves don’t know how to ride. Some came from countries where biking wasn’t popular or where girls didn’t ride bikes, he said, but others are US born and bred.

“It’s almost like it skipped a generation,” he said.

[A 2015 survey by YouGov](#), a global research company, found that while only 5 percent of people 55 and older can’t ride, 13 percent of 18-34-year-olds are non-riders.

Further, with kids and parents’ busy schedules, it’s easy for bike lessons to get pushed off to a another day — which never comes. “It’s one of those things where if you put it off, the next thing you know the kids are older and they are embarrassed and there is a lot of tension,” Fries said.

In Newton, after two years of trying, Beth Langston, a special education teacher, began to worry she’d never be able to teach her son, Chase, now 7, to ride.

“He was very scared of falling,” she said. “But he didn’t want to listen to us. It would always end in an argument.

“My husband said, ‘My kid isn’t going to know how to ride a bike.’”

And that might have been that, had a neighbor not mentioned McLucas, in Somerville. Mother and son took an intergenerational class.

“We’ll get Dunkin’ Donuts and make it a ritual,” said Langston, who is training for a triathlon and figured a biking brush-up couldn’t hurt. “If it takes the pressure off me, I’m good.”

Four lessons later, Chase was riding, and now, in a development that will come as a surprise to exactly zero parents, the squabbles are about getting him off the bike — not on it.

On Memorial Day, Elyse Mauer, 7, and her brother Markus, 5, were taking their first lessons from McLucas.

The kids had some experience — Elyse with training wheels and Markus on a small balance bike. But with no good biking spots near their Somerville home, and everyone busy, the training stalled, said their mother, Jenny Sauk, a physician.

But with the excitement of a lesson, the kids gained confidence coasting and quickly progressed to pedaling.

A shocked Sauk asked her son why the lessons worked.

“It’s better doing it this way,” Markus said. And with that, he rode off.