

FEATURE FOCUS:

Meeting the needs of all children

The Chalet School in Swindon caters for children with complex learning challenges. Two years after investing in Balanceability (a mainstream learn-to-cycle programme), it can safely say it has been blown away not just by the number of children who have learned to ride a bike, confounding parents and teachers alike, but also by the progress made in many other skills.

"Lots of children may not be able to access reading and maths, but for those who are physically able, riding a bike is a pretty amazing, tangible and achievable thing," says Liz Lloyd, who delivers the programme at the school.

"Our mission is to have every child leave Year 6 being able to cycle. But we see so many other benefits too."

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, Balanceability trainer Gregory Massey works with older children (aged nine to 16) with autism and Asperger's.

"The ability to ride a bike means that a child can go and play with friends or cycle to school or on holiday, or cycle to the shop to get an ice-cream. It helps bring normal childhood back," he says.

Learning to cycle generates many other outcomes because children master one skill in particular: balance. Patricia Maude MBE, Emeritus Fellow at Cambridge University's Homerton College, who specialises in children's physical literacy, advised Balanceability on the specific elements of the programme. Balance, she explains, underpins just about everything we do. Without balance we can't sit at a table to eat or write, nor can we stand, walk or run or do pretty much anything with our bodies. There are multiple cognitive implications, too.

"Learn-to-cycle programmes that use balance bikes," she says, "are brilliant because of two key factors: they boost balance, and they build on previous skills."



Boosting balance

All Balanceability's fun games develop balance and stability across the body's midline (standing still, or sitting in a bike saddle, for example). They also promote the development of dynamic balance, enhancing stability on alternate sides of the body (such as walking along a bench).

Progressive skills

Each skill builds slowly and steadily on previous skills. Once a child can balance on one leg, for example, they can try to do so with their eyes shut. As soon as they master walking along a line on the ground, they can have a go at stepping stones. "The progressive activities that form the building blocks of each element of biking provide seamless routes to successful cycling and encourage young children to become independent learners," says Patricia. "Put these two together and you give children access to a world they may never access otherwise – or at least, be unlikely to acquire at the same speed as they can through taking part in a programme like Balanceability."

The beauty of Balanceability is that once teachers are trained up, it's theirs to do what they want with and adapt as they see fit, whatever the individual needs of those in their cohort.

Liz explains how the Chalet School adapted Balanceability for SEND children. "We group children by ability, not age. Children who need to work on their gross motor skills and balance will join the balance games group. Those who need to work on coordination will be introduced to balance bikes. And then we might have a group doing transition to pedal bikes. So I could have a six-year-old and a 10-year-old in the same group."

Another key adaptation is time. Balanceability prides itself on being able to get most children riding a balance bike within 12 sessions. At the Chalet School, time goes out of the window. PE lead Claire Morris says, "We think in years, not weeks. Whatever pace the children want to do and need to work at, that's what we do. The children will get there, and it's amazing how much progress they do make in a short space of time."



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Materials can also be adapted. Greg, working with older children with autism and Asperger's, enlarges Balanceability's visual resources and sticks them on the wall, so that the children knew exactly what to expect and how long it will take, down to the second. "We adapt everything to their needs, to minimise anxiety," he explains.

The other hack is to break Balanceability's standard milestones into dozens of mini-milestones. "We see each tiny progression as a massive outcome and celebrate every little every achievement.

If a child has improved 0.001%, we know that it's amazing," says Liz. "This is not a quick fix programme, but if you can take the long view, it's phenomenal."

Taking part in a balance-based programme is extraordinarily beneficial for every single child who takes part, whether they learn to cycle or not. Patricia says, "We really need to shout about how important balance and stability are for every aspect of every child's life."

Here is what else Liz, Claire and Greg say about how they use Balanceability with children.

Games: balance

At first, Henry wouldn't even stand on the Balanceability 'stepping stones'. Liz repeatedly used the 'footprint' shapes to get him to concentrate on the left-right stepping motion. It took a whole year, but Henry can now do all the Balanceability balance games independently, and his balance has improved dramatically.

Helmets: sensory issues

Lucas struggles with sensory issues and refused to wear a helmet. His teacher took a helmet into the classroom and let Lucas see it and play with it and watch other children putting it on. Lucas eventually learned to ride. He now has his own pedal bike and goes cycling with his dad, who is thrilled about this.

Lightweight bikes: confidence

Many children will have had access only to heavy trikes that do little to encourage balance, but the balance bikes are lovely and lightweight, which makes them a pleasure to handle. It is great for confidence and it means that they learn more quickly.

Sitting on the saddle and walking the bike: strength

Sitting on a bike builds up the children's coordination, core stability and muscle strength, but it can take a long time to master the skill of letting the saddle take their weight. Later, children walk with the bike, which develops upper body strength, gross motor skills and coordination.

Propelling: stamina and fitness

Children learn to propel themselves forward, feet on the ground, using the same stability and stepping skills they developed in the balance games. Amelia can do all this, but tires easily. Liz adapted the activities to distract Amelia. "At first, she could only manage 20 seconds before stopping for water. Now she can do 25 minutes."

Spatial awareness and focus

At first, Stanley kept crashing into things. He was in Liz's balance bike group in the hall, following cones and tracks and gradually boosting his spatial awareness. One day, she took him outside, where there is a track round the edge of the playground. "It was brilliant. He was off. We could not believe how focused he was. He stayed on the track, and stopped where I asked him to. His spatial awareness had improved 10-fold."

Outside school: social opportunities

"Cycling opens up so many opportunities for them outside school and for the future. These children may not be able to sit down and tell mum or dad what kind of day they've had, they may not be able to sit down and play a board game. But they can all go on a bike ride together," says Liz.



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