

B the green mama bikes with her family

by Eco Aficionado
and syndicated
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Biking as a family is great: it's fun, relatively affordable, feels virtuous, and my kids absolutely love it! Family biking, though, has special needs. When biking with a child, most riders feel extra cautious. The bike is heavier and has additional appendages and there are lots of other practical concerns: where to put the extra gear, the second child, and what happens when the kids fall asleep.

I am just as lazy as the rest of them. My first thought when it is rainy or cold or when I am running late is NOT: wouldn't it be fun to bicycle? Yet, I also hate trying to find parking, trying to drive safely while children are whining in the back seat, and the expense of filling up my car with gasoline. Then there are the environmental reasons: most Canadians are shocked to realize that we are one of the most polluting countries in the world. We rank 15 out of 17 developed countries for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per capita. For most of Canada, transportation is the second largest source of GHG emissions after energy used in our buildings. For many families who heat their homes with hydro-electricity, transportation is their highest source of GHG emissions, and an easy one to do something about. Most of the trips you take as a family are trips of five miles or less and because of the way anti-pollution controls work on a car, these first few miles are the most polluting.

MAKING A HABIT OF FAMILY BIKING

Figuring out how to make biking part of your daily routine is really

about learning a new habit. As with any habit, you have to figure out how to make it easier to do. Here are a few tips:

- 1. Invest in bike parking.** Park your bike(s) somewhere convenient - both simple to get on the road and simple to get off the road. Pay for a parking space if you have to. If parking your bike isn't convenient and easy, then you are way less likely to succeed at making bicycling a habit. (Remember, you will still save money over driving the car or paying for transit, so invest in this.)
- 2. Gear-up! Get helmets you love.** Buy a light for every helmet, for the front and back of every bike, and invest in bells and horns, cute little baskets or bags that hang off the sides, rain-proof pants, and bright reflective jackets. Getting the right gear costs relatively little, but not having it can become a big barrier to biking. Feeling safe on a bike can make riders more confident and having the right gear is a big part of this. All busy parents hate not finding things when they need them, so buy extras and put everything in a designated spot that is easy to access. Getting out the door is hard enough without having to search for a working rear light, so every week do a little maintenance check to make sure everything is still charged, working, and where you think it is.
- 3. Research your routes.** While you are getting the hang of your new bicycling way of life, spend a little extra time to carefully plan your routes. In cities like Vancouver and Montreal, there are extensive networks of bike paths, including separated bike lanes. Figure out which roads and lanes you feel comfortable riding on and then map your route to the grocery store, playdates, school, daycare, and work. Many cities have websites to help (see further reading).

the green mama jumping off of her Madsen cargo bike



THE PEDAL-POWERED ALTERNATIVE TO THE MINI-VAN: CARGO BIKES

Cargo bikes are designed to carry extra cargo. They come in a few different shapes, sizes and styles. The "cargo" can be carried either in front of the "driver" or behind her; the bike might have a bucket or a box or simply seats that hold anywhere from 2-5 kids; and it might be built upon a two-wheeled bicycle frame or be a three-wheeled tricycle style. Cargo bikes are designed to carry heavy loads and thus often have stronger frames, spokes, and a double kickstand, which is extremely useful to safely hold the bicycle while kids load in and out.

TIP: If you want your cargo bike to have the capacity to function more like a pedal-powered-mini-van that you can load up with kids and groceries, I strongly encourage you to consider investing in electric-assist. Without it, you have to be very strong to get up and down any hills. As a relatively small woman, I consider it essential in hilly Vancouver, but I did ride a fully-loaded cargo bike in other cities without it. You can add electric assist as a retrofit to most bikes and it turns your bike into an "e-bike." That way you have a little electric power boost available to you every

time you pedal. The BionX is what we use. We chose it because it is competitively priced, gets great reviews, and was capable of working with our big cargo bike (and has a two year warranty).

the "bucket" bike

The Madsen is a cargo bike—a bike designed to carry extra cargo—that has the carrier in the back. The Madsen is what I ride with my kids. It is the lightest-weight, easiest-to-ride cargo bike I have ever tried (and I have tried quite a few). The bucket contains two bench seats and four seatbelts and we have indeed gotten four children in it. We have added electric assist to ours. For all these reasons and due to price, the Madsen gets my top recommendation.

Age range of passenger: A child needs to be able to sit-up well on their own to use the Madsen, approximately 2 years old to adult.

Price range: The Madsen comes from the U.S. and runs from \$1400 to \$2000. www.madsencycles.com

bakfiets-style bikes

When I lived in the flat-lands of Chicago, I rode a Bakfiets-style cargo bike. In Dutch, Bakfiets means "box bike" and, as the name implies, they look like a bicycle with a big box on the front. These bikes are extremely popular in the Netherlands where parents throw any number of kids, animals, and small household appliances into them. The smaller versions are usually bicycles with a wooden box that can carry two to four children. There are also larger versions that are tricycles and I have seen these carry five kids.

The cons: The bike itself is quite heavy. I can't imagine any but the very smallest of them ever working in a place with even moderate hills. As well, the two-wheeled Bakfiets can't carry more than about 80 kg before they get very hard to steer. Because the box is in front, it takes a while to get used to riding and it can feel a bit precarious. They do have light-weight, canvas versions of the tricycle style, but I found the maneuverability, tipiness, and inability to supplement with electric a turn-off.

The pros: These have been around for a number of years and they are by far the most beautiful cargo bikes available. There are a number of reputable manufacturers and they all provide wonderful accessories, including great rain covers (the Netherlands is a very rainy place). As well, almost all Bakfiets are designed so that you can put kids in seatbelts on the bench seats and safely hook infant car seats inside.

Age range of passenger: From infants to adults.

Price range: In the \$3,000 range. Learn more about getting a Cargo Bike in Canada at www.cargobike.ca

the long-tail bicycle

Long tail bicycles look a lot like any other around-the-town bike, but just a bit longer. The longer part in back can be set up to hold two bike seats: one right after another. I have even seen people put two kids on the back and one on the front in a front-bicycle carrier. The long-tail bicycles are also available as e-bikes.

Age range of passenger: From 9 months (in a kid bike seat) to adult.

Price range: Without electric-assist, under \$2000; with electric assist, \$3000.

WAYS TO TURN YOUR "REGULAR" BICYCLE INTO A FAMILY-BIKE

Your regular bicycle can become a family bike too just by adding a few "bells and whistles." You can add up to two bicycle seats, a wagon to pull behind the bike, bags and baskets to hold your stuff, and even

electric-assist to help haul it all to the bike you have now.

bike extension kits

Turn your road or mountain bike into a long-tail style cargo bike with this nifty new kit called the Free Radical Family Kit. Learn more at: www.xtracycle.com/cargo-bicycles/xtracycle-cargo-bicycles/xtracycle-freeradical/freeradical-family.html

Age range of passenger: The same as the long-tail: 9 months to adult.

Price range: Get a taste of the convenience of cargo biking for \$569.



the Mr. Fox ECO by MammaCangura - finally a truly green rear-mounted kid seat option!

the front-mounted kid seat

The first time I saw a kid riding on the front of a bicycle, I was in Ireland. The kid must have been five and her feet were nearly dragging on the ground, yet I still knew I wanted one for my child when she came. There are any number of kid bike seats that you can get now. They actually mount over the centre of the bike, but the kid looks to be sitting on a seat near your handlebars. The child really only fits in the front until about 3 years of age, but from about 9 months until that time, this is the most fun ride available. I love being able to look down and see my child while I am riding. It is also easier to balance than a bicycle with a back-mounted seat. The downsides are that when they fall asleep their heads bounce around unsupported and there is less room for the rider so if you have very long legs or you are 7 months pregnant you will find there is simply no room to get on the bike with this seat. The one I have is the Bobike mini and I love it.

Age range of passenger: Designed for children ages 9 months to 3 years.

Price range: Approximately \$150.