

FEATURE FOCUS:

Balanceability Training Day: What to Expect



Copperfields Nursery had already received a five-bike Balanceability pack. So deputy manager Alison Coleman had the balance bikes. She had the helmets. She had an information pack, and she had a bag full of colourful equipment. But – having not been on a bike for years – she hadn't got a clue what to do with it all. **It was time to be a Balanceability Instructor.**

Teachers get only six hours of PE training throughout their whole teacher training. In recent research, 40% of primary teachers indicated that this was not enough to prepare them to teach PE.

Feedback – of those who responded:

- 100% said that the Balanceability instructor was positive and effective (89% said he was excellent).
- 99% rated their satisfaction with the course as good or excellent.
- 83% said that the course had increased their confidence to deliver learn-to-cycle sessions in their setting.
- 89% said that the course had added to their knowledge and understanding of the importance of promoting and enabling physical activity during the early years.

In September 2015, Alison Coleman, of Copperfields Nursery in Eastbourne, East Sussex, attended a one-day Balanceability Instructor training day. Alison is one of 77 members of staff from across 50 early-years settings who have accessed free training, resources and equipment to support them to be able to teach very young children to ride balance bikes (as part of a wider initiative funded by East Sussex County Council – Public Health).

The training (a one-day course) took place at Hailsham Children's Centre. Alison, along with nine other people from various other local early years' settings, met Balanceability tutor Pete Zanzottera. The first thing she realised was that this was going to be a very hands-on experience. They would, Pete told them, not only be riding a bike themselves, but also working with some nursery-age children from the centre. "I hadn't ridden a bike for years. It was terrifying," said Alison. While Alison was confident about encouraging children to be more active, she wasn't sure about how to introduce them to bikes.

The best part of the day was:

“The hands-on practical work, role play and having a teaching session with the children.”

Maria Dyas,
Ore Church Mice,
Hastings.



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info@balanceability.com

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1. Back to basics: **Balance**

Her fears were somewhat allayed when she realised that the focus was not actually about bikes at all – but about balance. “I was struck by how simple the concept is,” she says. “Balance first; bike second.”

The group learned about different kinds of balance (see our other Feature Focus stories), and got some insight into why some children find it easier than others. They learned how to use the Balanceability equipment to help children develop static, dynamic and proactive balance, and had a go at balance games themselves, which got everyone warmed up and enjoying themselves.

2. In the saddle: **Bikes**

Only then did they move on to the bikes. “Pete took us through each stage of the learning outcomes, explaining exactly what we should be looking for, from getting children to pick a bike up the correct way through to scooting on a balance bike with confidence,” said Alison.

Balanceability Instructor Training is very practical, and part of the training day involved trying out an adult sized balance bike. “We all had to do what we would be asking the kids to do,” says Alison. “To really understand the importance of, for example, making sure you’ve got your bottom on the seat, we needed to experience it ourselves to see why it was so important.”

And it wasn't just the practical element that was important. Alison also got an insight into what it might be like for a child to do something very new in front of others. “I was so worried I was going to fall off.”

**The best part
of the day was:**

“Having a good understanding about balance bikes and how they can improve physical development.”

Jasmine Caister,
Ferry Road Nursery,
Rye.



3. Practical training: **Children**

At this point, it was time to let the trainees loose on some children for some practice. A small group of children, all around the age of three or four years old, were led into the room. Their eyes widened when they saw the balance bikes lined up against the wall. Alison and her peers then put some of the skills she's learnt into practice. “We had a go at running part of an actual session, including how to use the evaluation sheet and monitoring the children's progress,” says Alison. “It was really interesting to do this. When we'd been doing it with Pete, it was obviously all adults, all quite orderly. But when the children came in, it was a bit more chaotic. Some were confident physically, some weren't. It was very useful to experience that, to see what it might feel like to apply the Balanceability in real life, to teach our own children in the nursery, and to experience the range in physical skills and confidence. One child was very anxious about sitting on a balance bike. Another wanted to know when they'd be jumping off ramps.”

4: Afterthoughts: **Back in her setting**

After the training day, Alison then went back to her nursery and implemented balance bike sessions for the children there, using the Balanceability manual as support.

“The main thing I learned was the importance of going through it one step at a time. Start with balance, build up confidence.” When we caught up with Alison in early 2016, she told us that several children had made the transition to pedal bikes without difficulty. “If you try to just get children straight on to a bike, you're setting them to fail. But if you do the groundwork properly, they actually find it very easy.”

Cycling as a long-term intervention

Balanceability is the UK's first and only accredited 'learn to cycle' activity programme for children from the age of 2½ years. Alison's training was part of Healthy Active Little Ones (HALO) – East Sussex programme, an exciting 18-month workforce development programme – funded by East Sussex County Council Public Health – designed to support targeted early years settings to build upon their existing good practice and to improve their healthy eating and physical activity approaches and provision.

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