



On Your e-Bike: Riding Towards the Light

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

In a 1930 letter to his son Eduard, Albert Einstein wrote “Beim Menschen ist es wie beim Velo. Nur wenn er fæhrt, kann er bequem die Balance halten”. It has since been translated in different ways. A literal translation is: “People are like bicycles. They can keep their balance only as long as they keep moving”.

This article presents a familial reflection of a period of time during the first UK lockdown in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic when the world literally stopped. A snapshot of daily life with atypical children is captured along with the journey to realisation that life is indeed like riding a bicycle.

A sample of challenges faced by autistic children when routines are disrupted are presented in the context of a pandemic, with Einstein’s 20th century bicycle simile proving that “to keep your balance you must keep moving”, albeit with a 21st century twist with the aid of an electric motor.

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The epiphany came as I perused our family photographs during Lockdown 1.0. Four beaming faces including two bronzed adults juxtaposed with two ghostly small boys with dark shadows under their eyes. The summer of 2020 was a blur but the hundreds of photos we'd taken revealed the truth. The glorious sun beat down on us mercilessly that first lockdown as the outdoor garden space, despite the intermittent Wi-Fi, soon became my favourite place to work. The stark contrast with the darkness inside the house and the two vampire-like offspring was worrying to say the least, with their pallid faces blending into the newly painted 'rock salt' lounge walls.

Over the months my coaxing to come outside had mutated from a gentle suggestion to persuasive arguments, begging and ultimately bribes. The vampires did not like the bright light it would seem, or the smell of summer, the feel of the grass beneath their feet or the water in the new paddling pool touching their skin. I don't know why this surprised me – they never had done. So why now the vexation? Lockdown had stripped away their valuable days at school and with it, importantly, routines which forced them outside.

I surveyed my friends in vain hope that their children were becoming equally languor and square-eyed (there is some sadistic comfort in knowing that we are not alone in our challenges). The neurotypical offspring of friends were mostly engaged with daily long walks and basking in the heat of their gardens. Social media confirmed as much. Our friends with atypical offspring however were reporting similar spiralling scenarios of solitude. Children with rigid behaviour patterns and who generally struggle with social interactions and emotional regulation were quite quickly becoming reclusive, negating the tremendous progress they had made at specialist schools for autistic children.

The pandemic was affecting us all and in such diverse and often damaging ways, as we navigated this bewildering storm in our individual boats. Our boat it transpires was a submarine and, as we sank deeper and deeper into the abyssopelagic zone, I was finding myself googling 'Vitamin D deficiency' as well as 'should we get a dog?'. We got a cat, which ironically is a house cat (or should I say submarine cat?) as it has as much road safety awareness as the little bubbleheads.

So what saved us? E-bikes! It is not surprising that children with poor muscle tone, proprioception and coordination typically struggle to ride a bicycle. The little peoples' determination however paid off and our first big success came during Lockdown 1.0 as they mastered how to pedal their junior bikes (with bare feet and stabilisers, of course). The somewhat useful task of using the brakes was at best intermittent and so, whilst the pedalling was one of our proudest moments that summer, it did not facilitate my dream of going for family rides. My 100dB screams of "STOP!!!" did nothing to help as they freewheeled uncontrollably towards traffic other than to broadcast to neighbours my mushrooming disquietude.

My energy and not the children became exhausted that summer. I cannot recall where I first saw the e-bike online. It was army green and hence caught my eye but it wasn't long before I found myself shipping one over from the Netherlands, somewhat temerarily in hindsight considering I had not ridden a bike since the 'falling off' incident as a student back in the late 1990s. What made this bike so special? Apart from being army green and having a 250 W motor, it was the big banana seat. Think 1970s chopper! Ample length for an exhausted parent and one (two at a push) small children to straddle comfortably. To my utter delight, the younglings loved it. Our first trip around the block (with Pikachu strapped to the handlebars, a prerequisite when you are a 10 year old Pokémon fan) was a resounding success. Nobody fell off. Equally as important, the loquacious small boys grinned as the vitamin D painted their little faces. Thus began my obsession with all things e-bike and the freedom they afford to families like us, who otherwise might never experience the joy of sunny family adventures in the great outdoors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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