

The Power of Training Wheels

Almost every child who learns to ride a two-wheel bicycle begins with the help of training wheels. The child has perhaps been riding an assortment of tricycles and now wants to graduate to a "big kid's bike." She has the motivation and she has the bike but what she doesn't have quite yet is the balance and coordination that it takes to stay upright, steer, and pedal all at the same time. That's where the training wheels come in. They provide the balance as she develops the coordination. In the meantime, she can ride her bike. She doesn't have to wait until she has mastered all the skills necessary to ride a two-wheeled bicycle; she can exercise her desire to ride a "big kid's bike" right now and in the process of riding, she progresses to the point where she won't need the training wheels anymore.

Training wheels are a great metaphor for what it means to nurture and support a child's development. We look for what the child is interested in doing or accomplishing and then we provide the necessary support so he can accomplish his goal. For example, the emerging toddler wants to walk before he has the leg strength and balance needed for walking on his own. We don't sit back and wait for him to master walking all on his own; we literally follow his lead and walk behind him, holding his arms up over his head to provide the balance he needs. One day we will let go of his arms. When a baby starts to vocalize and make efforts at communicating, we don't wait until she can perfectly form words and sentences before we talk with her; we try to interpret her sounds and respond in a way that begins a dialogue. And one day she will hold up her end of that dialogue.

The word that is often used to describe this process of supporting and nurturing children's development is scaffolding. Just like painters erect scaffolding around a house in order to reach higher and higher, parents and teachers provide the aid and assistance that help children do their own reaching. Very often scaffolding happens naturally. When a parent reads a story to her child, for example, she helps the child learn that language is made up of separate, discreet words by pointing at the words on the page with her finger. Her child may even adopt this practice when she begins to read independently. The parent has provided the child with a tool that will assist her in the process of learning how to read.

Scaffolding works best when it's used to help a child accomplish something she is interested in doing. We are helping the child reach her own self-

determined goal. We observe the child's interest and offer the support needed to reach the goal.

Of course our ultimate goal is for the child to be able to act independently; eventually we will want to remove the scaffolding. We will no longer have to hold the toddler arms above her head because she will be able to walk on her own. As the child develops her language, we won't need to interpret as much and can engage in real dialogue with her. And the moment will come when she will find her balance and she will be able to stay upright and pedal and steer at the same time. That's when she'll ask you to take the training wheels off.

T.J. Corcoran, JD, MEd
Founder, The Corcoran School