

family

Look ma, no gasoline

More parents are finding that bicycles are a great way to get themselves and their kids around town

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Burley Design

Bicycle trailers are a practical way to turn your two-wheeled, one-person mode of transportation into a kind of human-powered station wagon, for hauling kids and groceries.

Imagine getting more exercise, feeling less rushed and having more quality time with your kids.

It's all possible if you're willing to undergo a paradigm shift and a bit of a lifestyle change, say proponents of the latest micro-trend in transportation.

Soccer moms and hockey dads, meet your new minivan. It's called a bicycle.

"It's (good) exercise, we're not burning fossil fuels, it's slowing things down a bit," said Megan James, a Eugene mother who has, increasingly, been using her bike, rather

than her Volvo station wagon to make grocery runs, go to the bank and tote her son Elliot, 7, to baseball games.

The idea of commuting by bike isn't new, and neither is the concept of carrying kids in a trailer attached to the back of a bicycle — Eugene's Burley Design has been a pioneer in the bike trailer industry for 30 years. But with gas prices soaring, bikes are looking more and more attractive.

And many parents are coming to the conclusion that the bike can be a better family vehicle than you might think.

"My kids are closer to me on a bike and they talk to me," said Summer Spinner, a Eugene mother of four who uses her ride to take her kids to school, go grocery shopping and do all the other errands that need doing. "We have much better conversations than we do in a car."

Of course, making that Trek behave more like a Toyota Previa takes some retro-fitting. Thanks to parents such as James and Spinner there's never been a better selection of Burley-style trailers, "Trail-a-Bikes" that make one seater into kid-friendly tandems, not to mention bike racks, European-style kid seats and other add-ons that promise to make a cargo machine out of your two wheeler.

At Paul's Bicycle Way of Life, assistant manager Kellen Norwood expects to sell out of popular models of the Burley trailer such as the Bee, which goes for about \$250. The top of the line model, the d'elite, sells for about \$500. It offers seating for two children with safety harnesses.

You can find trailers for less at discount retailers. The problem, Norwood says, is that some of those trailers have not been properly put together.

"It's not so much the quality of the build, but the quality of the bike (or trailer)," he explained. "You get (a trailer built by) a guy who builds barbecues one day and bikes the next."

A bike shop such as Paul's can inspect a trailer that's been purchased elsewhere or even assemble a new trailer for about \$25.

Both James and Spinner use a device called the Xtra Cycle, which lengthens your ride by 15 inches and converts most any bike into a virtual station wagon with the addition of extra-thick tubing, a platform and "saddle bags."

Unlike the much more common Burley-style trailers, which surround children in a roll cage with a five-point harness system, the Xtra Cycle is essentially a wooden platform that kids straddle in much the same manner as they would a horse.

Some might call such a device dangerous, but Spinner is not overly concerned.

"I'm not a safety ranger at all," she said. "I feel like I ride pretty smart, my kids wear helmets."

The device which costs around \$400, plus \$100 to \$200 for installation, and can hold up to 200 pounds.

Such a set up allows parents to pack up their kids and still have a place to put the extra toys, snacks, clothing and shopping bags. Some less family-focused users of the device have found the Xtra Cycle to be a great way to carry surfboards, kayaks, even construction ladders.

A warning on the Xtra Cycle Web site suggests practicing with the bike before riding with passengers or cargo and includes a long list of safety precautions.

Nevertheless, at local bike shops such as Paul's Bicycle Way of Life and Hutch's Bicycles, where the Xtra Cycle was recently out of stock, interest in kid-toting bike systems is higher than ever.

"There's definitely a big push for them," says Darren Ohl, a service manager at Hutch's. "Eugene is already such a bicycle friendly city. On top of that you have a couple of other factors that contribute to (people) getting on bicycles instead of (into) cars."

Fitness, environmental concerns, quality of life and of course, the high price of gas all contribute to the trend say cycling proponents such as Paul Adkins of Eugene. He says traveling by bike instead of by minivan makes him feel closer to his community and the people who live in it.

"If you pull up to a stop sign (next to) somebody in a car, there's no interaction," he says. "With a bike, we wave to each other. We might have a conversation."

Adkins, his wife Monica and their four kids might be the ultimate example of a family using bikes to their fullest. Recently, they sold their 1993 Previa minivan. They no longer own a car.

"We were talking (the other day) about how liberated we feel," Adkins said. "This may seem obvious to people who have already pared down, but until you start, you don't know how free you can feel."

For the Adkinses, freedom comes in the form of a tandem-style bike that seats three, called the Family Traveler. Made locally by Bike Friday, the machine is unusual enough by itself, but Adkins pairs it with a Burley trailer to create enough seating for two kids and bags of groceries. The family owns a second Burley trailer and other bikes as well.

Bicycling advocates such as Adkins refer to a "perfect storm" of factors that's convincing more families to rethink the bicycle as a means of transportation for the whole family.

They point to northern European countries such as Holland and Denmark where families regularly strap their kids in and go about their daily business.

"Their cities are built a little bit differently, but there are people who do five-mile commuting with three or four kids and they have busy lives just like we do," says bike proponent Shane Rhodes.

The program manager of the local chapter of Safe Routes to School, Rhodes promotes

“active transportation” to and from school.

He says the idea of riding instead of driving your kids to school is becoming more mainstream and believes even more parents would make the decision if they saw others doing it.

“It’s not such an extreme idea any more,” he said. “Part of the reason (Europeans do it) is that everyone else is doing it, so they watch other people doing it, and they get it.”

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