



BUYING A BIKE FOR A YOUNG RIDER

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT



Buying a bike for a young rider can be harder than it first appears. Many small bikes are not truly designed around young bodies; they are often scaled-down versions of adult bikes. That can mean cranks that are too long, handlebars that are too wide, brake levers that are too far away, and stock gears that are far too big.

The aim is not to buy the most expensive bike, the lightest bike, or the bike that looks most like a pro race bike. The aim is to find something the rider can control, maintain, grow with, and enjoy.

1. What will the bike be used for?

Start with the use case. Is the bike mainly for road racing, cyclo-cross, club sessions, family rides, school routes, or a bit of everything?

For many families, one bike that can do both road and cyclo-cross may make more sense than owning separate bikes. It reduces cost, simplifies storage, and may be enough for a rider who is still developing. A modern cyclo-cross bike can have geometry very close to a road bike and, with the right tyres, wheels and position, can be just as fast in many circuit races.

But there is a trade-off. One bike doing two jobs can mean more maintenance: swapping wheels, checking brake alignment, cleaning after muddy sessions, replacing worn parts sooner, and retuning things more often. A CX bike that has been raced in winter mud will need more care than a summer-only road bike. So the question is not simply “Can one bike do both?” It is also “Who is going to keep it working?”

2. Fit today, but think about growth

A bike should fit the rider now. Too much “room to grow” can make the bike harder to control, harder to brake on, and less enjoyable. But it is also sensible to think about how the rider might grow with the bike.

As they get taller and stronger, a setup can often be adjusted gradually: a slightly longer stem, a change in saddle position, an offset seatpost, a change in saddle height, different bars, or eventually marginally longer cranks. This is one of the few guarantees in youth cycling: if you feed them, they do tend to grow.

A useful visual check is the rider’s elbow position. A gentle bend in the elbow usually suggests they are not too stretched and can absorb bumps, steer properly, stay relaxed, and have more control. Sometimes just a few millimeters of change at the saddle, stem or lever position can make a large difference to comfort — and comfort often turns into speed.

Comfort beats aero. But comfortable aero is fastest. A rider who is relaxed, stable and confident will usually be quicker than one forced into a position that looks fast but is hard to hold for the duration of their race.

The real aim

Control



Comfort



Confidence



Speed



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The photos below show how small setup changes can make a big difference. On this Scatto, small adjustments to saddle height, reach and lever position helped create a more comfortable, controlled position without making the bike too small to grow with.



3. Contact points matter

Look closely at the contact points: saddle, pedals, bars and brake levers.

Can the rider reach the brakes comfortably from the position they actually use? Are the bars a sensible width (typically similar to the width of the riders' shoulders)? Are the hoods in a natural position? Is the saddle comfortable? Are the cranks appropriate for their leg length?

Electronic shifting is also worth a brief mention here. It can be useful for smaller hands because it needs only a light button press rather than a bigger mechanical lever movement. That can make shifting easier from the hoods, especially for riders who struggle to move a mechanical lever cleanly while maintaining control. The trade-off is the significant increase in cost, charging, compatibility and complexity more electronics to look after.

If any of the terminology relating to bike components or hardware appears confusing, both Park Tool and GCN have excellent videos on YouTube aimed at both absolute beginners and experienced mechanics.

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4. Gearing and rollout

Stock gearing on many small road bikes is still often something like 50/34 chainrings with an 11–32 cassette. That may be normal on an adult bike, but it is usually far too big for youth road racing unless the gears are heavily locked out.

British Cycling uses rollout limits for youth road racing. Rollout is the distance the bike travels in one complete revolution of the cranks, so it should be checked by physically rolling the bike out, not just by looking at the chainring and cassette numbers. Tyre size, tyre pressure, rim size and tread can all affect the final measurement. The current published 2026 limits for Youth C /Under 12's are 6.34 metres. As a conservative guide, achieving this with stock gears would mean locking out half of the cassette which is not possible with some rear derailleurs.

For younger riders, a 1x setup is also worth giving serious consideration. Removing the front derailleur can make the bike simpler to use and maintain. There is only one shifter to think about, fewer adjustments, and more room for the rider to focus on riding rather than gear selection. It can also make rollout compliance simpler because the highest gear is easier to control through chainring and cassette choice. The trade-off is that the jumps between gears may be slightly larger, and the rider may have fewer options for keeping a smooth cadence if tackling anything super steep.

If gears need restricting, parents should look at the official British Cycling guidance on rollout checks and gear restriction, including how gears can be physically restricted or locked off. The key point is that the bike must not be able to select a gear that exceeds the permitted rollout. Do not assume that a particular cassette or chainring combination is compliant until it has been checked properly.



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5. Compatibility makes life easier

Think about compatibility, especially if you already ride or have other bikes in the household.

An 11-speed setup can be very practical because many people already have spare cassettes, chains, wheels or parts in the garage. Sticking with the same manufacturer across several bikes can also reduce hassle. If most of your bikes use Shimano, for example, it is easier to understand the parts, swap spares, use the same tools and solve problems quickly.

This matters even more when a bike is being raced. Last-minute repairs are much easier when the parts are familiar.

6. Rim brakes or disc brakes?

Both can work.

Rim brakes are simple, light, usually cheaper to maintain, and easier to understand. They are perfectly suitable for road and circuit racing, and possibly ideal for lighter athletes in most conditions.

Disc brakes offer more consistent braking in wet or extremely muddy conditions, which can be useful for cyclo-cross. They can also add complexity: pad rub, rotor alignment, hydraulic bleeding, and higher replacement costs.

The key question is not “rim or disc?” It is: can the rider reach the levers, brake confidently, and can the family keep the system maintained?

7. New or used?

There are arguments for both.

A new bike gives you known history, a warranty, and hopefully fewer immediate mechanical problems. It may be the simplest route for families new to cycling, and it's always great to support the local bike shop (such as AW Cycles, who have been longstanding supporters). The downside is cost, and that heartbreaking moment when a pristine new bike gets its first scratch, which can happen very quickly in youth riding.

The used market can be excellent, and offers great value for money. Many young riders outgrow good bikes before they wear them out, and well-chosen used bikes can often be sold on later. Aluminium frames are typically easier to buy with confidence than used carbon frames, because damage can be easier to spot. Carbon can be perfectly fine, but hidden damage is harder to assess, and the only true way to confirm there is no internal damage is specialist non-destructive inspection such as X-ray.

Unless you really know what you are looking at, be cautious with used carbon.



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8. Where to look

Good places to look include local bike shops, club networks, youth race groups, parents of older riders, reputable used-bike platforms, eBay and Facebook Marketplace.

The advantage of buying through a club or local cycling network is that the bike may have known history. A local bike shop may cost more, but setup help, aftercare and basic mechanical support can be valuable, especially for families entering the sport from outside cycling.

eBay and Facebook Marketplace can be useful, but use caution. Stolen bikes do appear online. Before buying, ask yourself three simple questions:

- Does the seller seem to know the bike?

Can they explain where it came from, how it was used, what size it is, and why they are selling it?

- Does the price make sense?

A bargain is possible, but a very cheap bike with vague details should raise concern.

- Can the seller provide proof of ownership or history?

A receipt, original order email, service history, photos of the bike being used, or a plausible upgrade/outgrown-bike story all help.

9. When viewing a used bike, check:

- Frame and fork for cracks, dents, corrosion or crash marks
- Wheels for wobble, rim wear and bearing play
- Tyres for cuts, degradation, or age cracking
- Brakes for power, pad wear and lever reach
- Gears for clean shifting
- Chain wear using a chain checking tool
- Cassette and chainrings for shark-tooth wear
- Seatpost and stem bolts for signs of neglect or overtightening

A cheap bike can become expensive quickly if it needs tyres, chain, cassette, brake pads, cables, bar tape and a service.



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10. Maintenance: families become mechanics

Even if you are not a cyclist yourself, you will probably become involved in maintenance. At the very least, someone should supervise cleaning, chain lubrication and basic adjustments until the rider knows what they are doing.

Learn the M-check: wheels, tyres, brakes, bars, headset, saddle, cranks, pedals, chain and gears. It is a simple pre-ride habit that catches many problems early.

Park Tool and GCN have useful maintenance videos on YouTube. Basic maintenance books can help too. Local workshops, such as Reading Bike Kitchen or similar community bike projects, may offer introductory maintenance sessions. These are useful for families who are new to the sport and do not yet have tools, experience or confidence.

11. Chains: clean, lubed, or waxed

A clean drivetrain makes a bike faster, quieter and cheaper to run.

Waxed chains are excellent if you are willing to manage the process. Otherwise, a clean and correctly lubricated chain is fine. The basics matter most: know when the chain is dirty, when it needs lubrication, and when it is worn out.

A chain checker is a small, cheap tool that can save money. Replacing a chain on time is much cheaper than wearing out the cassette and chainrings.

A Final thought

Buying a bike for a young rider is really about asking the right questions. What will they use it for? Can they control it? Can they brake safely? Can the bike grow with them? Can it be maintained? Are the parts compatible with what you already have? Is the gearing legal for racing?

The best bike is not always the newest or most expensive one. It is the one that fits, works, can be looked after, and helps the rider enjoy the sport.

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1. What will it be used for?

- Road, cyclo-cross, school, family rides?
- One bike can do both road + CX
- But more wheel swaps, cleaning and wear



2. Does it fit now — and allow growth?

- Bike has to fit today
- Think saddle position, stem, seatpost, bar reach
- A gentle bend in the elbows helps comfort + control



Small setup changes can make a big difference



3. Check the contact points

- Brake reach
- Bar width
- Saddle comfort
- Crank length



4. Gearing and rollout

- Stock gears may be too large
- 1x can be simpler for younger riders
- Check official British Cycling rollout guidance



5. New or used?

- New: simple, supported, but expensive
- Used: often great value
- Be cautious with stolen bikes and damaged frames



6. Can you keep it running?

- Compatibility makes life easier
- Learn the M-check
- Clean and lube the chain
- Know when a components need replacing