

Camp helps special needs children bicycle on their own



Christie Campbell a former client of KidsAbility and paralympian is spotted by Marie Malcolm and Felix Leung as she learns to ride a bike at the Preston Arena. KidsAbility is running a week-long bike camp called Lose the Training Wheels to help children and youth with special needs learn how to ride a bicycle independently. The Lose the Training Wheels program will be touring to 90 cities in the U.S. and Canada. David Bebee/The Record Source: The Record

By Johanna Weidner, Record staff

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CAMBRIDGE — Nine-year-old Ryan Kokiw simply wants to bike with his older brother.

He doesn't want to be held back by his parents steadying him while he struggles to pedal and balance — a big challenge for a child with cerebral palsy.

"I thought it would be cool to actually ride by myself," Ryan said.

Finally, Ryan is close to that freedom with the guidance he's getting this week at a camp that teaches children and youth with special needs to bicycle independently.

KidsAbility is hosting Lose the Training Wheels, a special program developed in the United States and expanded to Canada. This week's camp in Cambridge is the only in

Ontario this summer, with a provincial grant and City of Cambridge support to reduce the cost for parents.

A child like Ryan starts on a special bicycle with a roller at the back instead of a wheel to work on balance. The roller is changed to more tapered versions as the child gets better, before finally switching to a two-wheeled bike equipped with a handle at the back for volunteers to hold when needed.

"The volunteers are there for safety and encouragement," said Meg Shirley, a recreation therapist at KidsAbility helping with the camp.

Progressing slowly in a safe and supportive environment means the majority of children ride a conventional bike by the end of the weeklong camp.

"There's no reason why these kids can't learn. It just takes them longer," Shirley said.

Without the extra time and encouragement, many children with physical and intellectual disabilities aren't able to ride on their own or need an expensive adapted bicycle.

Ryan stays on his bicycle practising as long as he can during his daily sessions. The first day was tough, he said, because his feet wouldn't stay on the pedals. By the third day, the Cambridge boy needed clips only on one foot.

His mother Christine Kokiw is amazed at his progress.

"He's on there. He's going. He's doing it," she said.

Ryan has been going to KidsAbility for therapy since he was a few months old and his parents tried to get him biking on his own without success. Christine was overwhelmed watching her son pedal around a Preston arena, tears filling her eyes.

"It's just phenomenal," she said.

Carolyn Campbell was also thrilled to watch her daughter Christy quickly learn the basics of cycling at the camp after so many attempts starting when Christy was a small child coping with cerebral palsy.

"This is a big dream," Carolyn said.

Although Christy competed in the Paralympics in wheelchair track, biking was a challenge with her poor balance.

"I just wanted to learn how to ride a two-wheeler," said Christy, 28.

When she felt confident on a bicycle with rollers on Wednesday, Christy moved to a regular bike. First she pedalled slowly and steadied by volunteers. Then in no time Christy was zooming around on her own.

"It was good until I got to a turn and then I wobbled," Christy said during a brief water break before running back to her bike for another ride.

Christy's parents revelled in her triumph.

"You can't wipe the grin off her face," her mother said. "That expression really belongs to her today."

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