

QUALITY KIDS' BIKES

Practical bikes for primary school age children are rare. Adam Coffman and daughter Mia tested two. Dan Joyce added comment and analysis



Even in the modern world of games consoles and mobile phones, bikes feature highly on children's Christmas wish lists. A seasonal spike in sales is unlikely for the better quality bikes that CTC members tend to buy for their kids or grandchildren.

But whatever the time of year, finding decent children's bikes can be hard enough in itself. The market is awash with mountain bike look-alikes that are heavy and ill thought-out. Better quality junior mountain bikes are available, notably from Scott and Kona. Practical runarounds – for street cycling, recreational riding and short tours – are like hen's teeth, however.

We went looking for general purpose bikes for children aged around five to eight and drew up a shortlist of two, both from children's bike specialists: Islabikes and Puky. UK-based Islabikes were founded a few years ago by Isla Rowntree, a lifelong cyclist and bike

designer well known for her cyclo-cross exploits and for her Trailerbike – a newer version of which she still produces. Puky (say 'pooky') are a German company who produce fully-equipped Euro town bikes for children.

There are five versions of the Islabikes Beinn for different sizes of riders. This is the smallest 20-inch wheel version. Like the others it can be specified for use as a mountain bike, a tourer, a commuter, and more. Ours had the optional mudguards, carrier rack and propstand.

The Skyride 20-3 is the girl's version of Puky's 20-inch wheel street bike; the boy's has a different colour scheme, a top tube, and a different name – the Crusader 20-3. Both have three-speed hub gears, a coaster brake, hub dynamo lighting, a propstand, carrier rack and mudguards.

Frame and fork

Children's bikes need scaling down to fit them. There's more to that than making the seat tube shorter. The

bike designer has to start with correct length cranks. If a child's bike is built around cranks that are too long, as most are, the bike frame is forced out of proportion. The bottom bracket has to be made higher to prevent pedal strikes on the floor. This means that either the saddle-to-pedal or saddle-to-floor distance must be wrong: you can set the saddle high enough for your child to pedal properly or you can set it low enough for them to be able to touch the floor – not both.

The bottom bracket to front hub distance (the bike's front centres) has to be made longer so that there won't be toe overlap with the front wheel, and this has a knock on effect of increasing the reach of the bike and stretching out your child's riding position.

As a rough guideline, 10% of height is a reasonable length for children's cranks. So a 120cm child would need ~120mm cranks. Some manufacturers seem to fit whatever they've got left in stock, or (slightly better) whatever ought to be on the next size of bike up. Thankfully both Islabikes and Puky get it right. The frame and components of both bikes are scaled down so that children can comfortably and confidently ride them.

Children's bikes also need to be lighter. Children weigh much less than adults anyway and pound-for-pound they're weaker too. Pity the child, then, who is saddled with a bike that weighs more than her parent's. Why are many children's bikes so heavy? Partly because they're cheaper and use cruder, heavier components. Sometimes because heavier steel tubing is used in chunky diameters, as if it were aluminium. And often because they have cheap suspension forks that bring little to the bike except additional mass.

Both the Beinn and the Skyride are fairly light. That's because they have aluminium frames and rigid steel forks. They also make much use of aluminium alloy components – seatpost, handlebars etc. – instead of

Children will get enjoyment out of any bike, but one that fits properly and doesn't weigh 15kg will be much more fun

TECH SPEC

Bike	Islabikes Beinn 20
Price	£266.96 as tested (from £209.99)
Weight	10.5kg (from 8.8kg)
Size	Small (10" frame)
Age range	5+
Sizes available	Small, Large
Colours	Silver & blue, silver & purple
Frame & fork	7005 T6 aluminium frame, fittings for rear carrier rack, mudguard, 1 bottle. Chrome-moly steel fork, fittings for mudguard.
Wheels	20 x 1.35in semi-slick tyres, 28-hole aluminium double-wall rims, aluminium quick release hubs.
Transmission	junior aluminium flat pedals, 114mm cranks, 36T chainring with double chainguard, cartridge bottom bracket, Sram SX4 rear derailleur, Sram 3.0 Comp 7-speed shifter. 7 gears.
Braking	Tektro V-brakes with short reach levers
Steering & seating	1" threadless headset, 60mm aluminium stem, 46cm aluminium flat handlebar, anatomic saddle, aluminium micro-adjust seatpost.
Accessories	chromo-plastic mudguards (£16.99), four-point fixing tubular aluminium luggage rack (£29.99), propstand (£9.99). Others available.
Contact	Islabikes 01584 856881, www.islabikes.co.uk

Bike	Puky Skyride 20-3
Price	£290
Weight	12.5kg
Size	one size
Age range	6+
Sizes available	one size (similar larger and smaller bikes available)
Colours	white & blue, white & pink, white & red
Frame & fork	6061 aluminium frame, fittings for rear carrier and mudguard. Steel fork, fittings for mudguard.
Wheels	Tour Trax 20 x 1.75in tyres, 36-hole aluminium double wall rims, Sram iLight hub dynamo (front hub), Sram iMotion 3-speed hub (rear).
Transmission	2k Antislip flat pedals, 127mm chainset, 38T chainring, VP BSA cartridge bottom bracket. 3 gears.
Braking	V-brakes front and rear with levers to suit small hands, plus back-pedal coaster brake
Steering & seating	threaded headset, quill stem, all-rounder handlebar, Selle Royal Kid saddle, aluminium micro-adjust seatpost.
Accessories	Dynamo lighting (Basta halogen headlight and Busch und Müller LED rear, with standlight), mudguards, rear carrier rack, chainguard, propstand.
Contact	Amba Marketing 01392 829903, www.amba-marketing.com



steel. The bikes' accessories tip the scales back a bit the other way, but they're still much better than most.

'The Beinn only weighs 10.5kg even with the accessories,' said Adam Coffman. 'It's light up enough for a child to carry up a small flight of stairs or onto a train carriage. The Puky is slightly heavier but still easy to manoeuvre.'

Equipment

The number of gears on a child's bike is sometimes a badge of status, with more equating to better. But few primary school age children use a front

derailleur correctly; they tend to end up in the small chainring and small sprocket. A smaller number of gears that they will use correctly is more useful. The Beinn has seven gears, the Skyride three.

'The main difference is that the Islabike has derailleur gears and a wide ratio cassette (12-32T) with a low enough gear to get up a steep hill,' Adam noted. 'The Puky on the other hand has a 3-speed Sram iMotion hub gear. My experience is that children of this age do not use their gears as much as they should, so a 3-speed hub gear would be ideal in most cases.'

Both bikes use twist-shifters. They're intuitive – especially given the gear indicator windows – and they allow the whole hand to stay wrapped around the grip while changing gear. The range of the Skyride's gears is less – 186% versus 266% for the Beinn – although it does have the advantage that the gears can be changed while stationary.

The Beinn's 1 x 7 gear set-up works well. There are no 'overlap' gears, of course, and the chain won't unship from its single front chainring because it has a deep, double-sided plastic guard. At the back, the hub is a

The Islabikes Beinn uses a 1x7 derailleur set up, whereas the Puky Skyride uses a 3-speed hub gear. Both have key accessories – the Skyride even comes with a hub dynamo!

The Skyride is specifically a street bike. The Beinn is different: it's a do-everything bike

Freehub with a 7-speed cassette and not the threaded hub with a screw-on freewheel block that you might expect. This has the advantage of putting the drive side hub bearings closer to the end of the axle, which means breakage is less likely – an issue if you've got a child who likes doing jumps. One minor downside is that the hub body is narrower than 8- or 9-speed Freehubs, so you can't simply switch cassette and shifter to upgrade.

The brakes are close at hand on both bikes. 'Both had short-reach aluminium brake levers that are easily adjustable for small hands,' Adam said. 'Combined with V-brakes they give these bikes powerful braking systems.' The Skyride actually has a third brake: a back pedal brake that's incorporated into the iMotion hub.

Both bikes use 20-inch (ISO 406) wheels. That's the BMX standard and a common one for children's bikes and for some cargo bikes and recumbents, so there's a wide choice of tyres available if you want to change them. Doing so is a point-of-sale option with the Beinn, or you can purchase additional tyres so as to use the bike on tarmac during the week and on off-road trails at the weekend.

You can purchase a host of optional accessories for the Beinn, including the carrier rack, mudguards and propstand that were fitted to the test bike. LED battery lights, different tyres, and panniers are other options. You can even have your child's name on the top tube. The Skyride, meanwhile, comes as stock with a full set of practical accessories: mudguards, chainguard, carrier rack, propstand and hub dynamo lighting.

Ride

We can't ride these bikes. But their proportions are spot on for their intended age riders, and each offers a comfortably upright riding position.

'My daughter Mia really enjoyed riding both bikes,' Adam said. 'And as her previous bike had much smaller

wheels she particularly relished being able to travel greater distances more easily. She found the Islabike easier to manoeuvre probably due to it being lighter.'

The focus of each bike is different. The Skyride is specifically a street bike: it's ideal for riding to the park, to school, to a friend's house. It will also handle fine on fairly smooth off-road tracks, thanks to its 1.75in wide tyres, and it will cope with light touring.

The Beinn is different: it's a do-everything bike. It's fine as a street bike or tourer with the accessories and tyre choice that we gave ours, but with a tyre change and the accessories removed it's a proper mountain bike too – its low weight more than compensating for the lack of a dubious-quality suspension fork off-road.

Summary

These are both benchmark bikes for children aged around five to seven or eight. If you've got a younger or older child, Islabikes and Puky have options either side – from little balance bikes up to bikes with 24-inch wheels (either manufacturer) or even 26-inch or 700C wheels (Islabikes).

'In an ideal world I would have a



combination of both of these bikes,' wrote Adam. 'I'd like the subtle gender-free styling (for passing on to younger brothers or cousins) of the Islabike combined with the low maintenance hub gear and dynamo of the Puky.'

The choice between the two will depend on what your child will be doing with the bike. If the bike will be pressed into service in a variety of different roles, the more versatile Islabikes Beinn is the stronger contender; if it won't see singletrack or steep hills but might get used in the evening too – perhaps by a car-free family? – the Puky Skyride is the more practical option. But you can't go wrong with either of them.

Mini mountain bikes are great for mountain biking, but for riding to school or playing in the park, practical bikes are more useful

Other bikes for girls



Trek Mystic 20
£159.99

Sensible 20"-wheel singlespeed with a lightweight aluminium frame, rigid fork, 115mm cranks, and an upright riding position courtesy of BMX style bars. Even has a propstand. Just add mudguards. www.trekbikes.com/uk/en/



Gazelle Vlinder 20 Girls
£269.99

Vlinder means 'butterfly'. It's a singlespeed Dutch utility bike with 20" wheels, coaster brake, full chaincase, mudguards, rack, propstand, basket and dynamo lighting. www.cycleheaven.co.uk and www.gazellebicycles.co.uk



Raleigh Krush 20"
£159.99

Steel frame isn't light but it saves weight by avoiding the 'cheap suspension fork' trap, and it'll take mudguards. Its six-speed Shimano twistgrip gears and other components are okay. www.halfords.com