

Anytime TRAILS

Trail centres make a great autumn break for families with mountain bikes. Father of three **Dan Joyce** explains why

Summer isn't the only season to go mountain biking with your children. Wrap up well and the shorter days of autumn can be just as good. Apart from the weather, the success of a day's singletrack excursion will be determined by your route. Some bits of bridleway disappear under mud deep enough to suck your shoes off, and while getting muddy can be fun, near impassable trails are not. That's where Britain's growing network of man-made trail centres score: they're usable year round. Amenities

like toilets, a café and maybe a bike wash don't hurt either.

Which trails?

Trail centres increasingly use a route-grading system like that in skiing. Green routes ('easy') are suitable for beginners and families. Any bike will cope – even one with a trailer-cycle or child-seat. Blue routes ('moderate') are longer and hillier, but most are still suitable for reasonably fit families riding sturdy hybrids. Red routes ('difficult') are mountain bike trails that you need a proper mountain bike and a good

level of fitness and riding skill to enjoy. Black routes ('severe') are for experienced, skilled riders. For more, follow the 'Where can I cycle?' link at www.ctc.org.uk/mtb.

The trail grading covers how physically taxing the route is as well as its technical difficulty. Older children on 24-inch wheel or larger bikes may still enjoy green or blue rated routes, but may hanker after the full-on singletrack experience – yet lack the endurance to tackle a full loop. Or they might be skilled enough for only *some* of the sections. The solution to this is to





devise your own routes by cherry-picking the most suitable sections.

Singletrack a la carte

Route gradings are a guideline. Only you really know what your children are happy riding. The golden rule for successful family singletrack riding is to do the route by yourself first.

Either return with your kids to routes that you already know, or if you're going there yourself for the first time do the route earlier the same day. Most routes can be ridden within a couple of hours or so.

Trail centre routes are waymarked but to cherry-pick trail sections rather than do the whole lot you want a map. If the trail centre has amenities, chances are there will be a map on sale (or given away free) at the bike shop or café. You can often download one from the internet in advance simply by Googling the trail centre, and you might even find a GPS track log.

Note the most suitable sections of singletrack on your map. For many children, that will be smooth, flowing track where the difficulty only really ramps up with increasing speed. They can ride those bits at their own level rather than over-reaching – and over-balancing – on a rock garden or difficult drop-off. (Although you can walk around these sections if need be.)

Now link them up using bits of forest fireroad. This isn't really any different from picking out your favourite cross-country trails on an OS map; it's just on a smaller scale.

Riding together

When you ride with your child, you will generally ride behind. You can't tell what's happening if you're in front, and it can be difficult to look back on a narrow, bumpy track. You can see what your child is doing, give instructions, describe what's coming up ahead, and are on hand immediately if required.

Be prepared to stop, ideally on climbs or flat bits rather than descents, moving off to the side of the trail to let other riders through. You can pass on basic trail skills as you ride. Without being too dictatorial, remind your child about gear and brake use, and positioning and weight distribution on the bike.

There are some mountain bike skills courses aimed at children too, and these can help build both confidence and ability. For more information, see www.ctc.org.uk/cycletraining or tel: 0844 736 8460.

Putting it into practice

Earlier this year – albeit in late July rather than October – I was at Coed y Brenin with two of my sons. Twelve-year-old William is at home

on blue routes, while 14-year-old Matthew is capable of riding anything on a red graded route – if it's not too long.

Coed y Brenin's most rideable bits of singletrack, arguably, are 'Dream Time' and 'Pink Heifer'. The former is part of the (red-graded) Temtiwr Trail. Adding the Pink Heifer section was straightforward: Matthew and I crossed the River Mawddach by the bridge, rode a couple of hundred metres of fireroad, then joined the end of the MBR Trail, which took us through Pink Heifer and back onto the Temtiwr. He loved it.

There isn't a blue route at Coed y Brenin and the start of the Temtiwr is steppy and rocky, so William and I rode out and back on the green route, adding the Pink Heifer halfway round. In hindsight, we should have headed uphill on the tarmac road that the green route crosses to take in Dream Time as well. We'll do that next time.

Locally, at Dalby Forest, the red route has a cloverleaf pattern. It's easy to segment. William's ridden short bits, while Matthew has done the lot – in thirds.

Other trail centres offer just as many opportunities. Why not try them out this half term?

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WHERE NEXT?

The Forestry Commission has created more than 2,600km of waymarked cycle trails. You can search an online database for routes near you: www.forestry.gov.uk/cycling. Information on facilities is provided too. You can also find a list of trails at mtbtrailtime.googlepages.com/trailcentres. This is a work in progress, but looks promising.

For a more definitive list of places to ride throughout the UK, get 'Where to Mountain Bike in Britain' by Nicky Crowther (£12, www.wheretomtb.com).

For more information about mountain biking with children, see The CTC Guide to Family Cycling (£9.99, tel: 01795 414824 to order).