

# Teaching Kids to DOWNHILL SKI

TEXT & PHOTO BY BILLIE MUNRO AUDIA

Teaching downhill skiing to kids has become a passion for me, as seeing a child's ear-to-ear smile out on the slopes is a delight. Instructing kids to ski requires a healthy mix of knowledge, enthusiasm, creativity, and patience. Chris Saylor, director of the children's ski program at Okemo Mountain Resort, reminds parents that patience is key when teaching kids to ski. "Some kids may be able to handle the chairlift right away, but it may take an entire season for others to get comfortable with it, so be patient and try not to put your expectations onto your kids," he advises. He should know, as the Snow Stars program he runs at Okemo teaches nearly 13,000 four-to-seven-year olds how to ski each year.

## START IN THE HOUSE

Generally, kids learn best when they are comfortable and feel safe. Becoming familiar with ski equipment is the first step toward getting comfortable with the sport. Before heading out on the mountain, kids should begin by wearing their ski boots around the house, playing "space adventurer" to get used to them. Use this pre-snow time to learn the correct name of each piece of equipment, so when the ski instructor refers to it in class, the kids will know what she means. For example, the tips of skis are at the front, tails are at the back, and the bindings connect boots to the skis.

## TAKE IT TO THE SNOW

Once at the ski mountain, find a level area and help kids step into their bindings. As in other sports, the starting point for downhill skiing is a strong, confident stance: stand upright, knees slightly bent, skis pointing forward and parallel, about shoulder width apart. The skis are now in what I like to call the "French fry" position, which is important to learn in anticipation of gliding down an incline. Then spend a few minutes doing balance and weight-shifting drills. For example, lift up one ski while balancing on the grounded ski and alternate, moving like a toy soldier marching in place. Sound effects add to the fun, so try singing the "oompa loompa" song from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* while marching. This type of movement will help to build confidence and develop balance.

Walking like a penguin (ski tips turned out, step forward by bringing one ski tail forward at a time) or moving like a gorilla (swinging arms side to side while taking giant steps) is a good way to get used to moving



The author's husband, Pino, coaching their three-year old Gianluca.

around with skis on the snow. While standing in place, have kids form a wedge or "slice of pizza" with their skis by aiming their ski tips together and widening the distance between their ski tails. Pizza position will come in handy when they need to slow down.

## AT THE MOUNTAIN

The easiest lift for little kids is the magic carpet: a conveyor belt that moves standing skiers up the mountain. Most family-oriented ski areas in the US and Canada have magic carpet lifts on the kiddie slopes. Okemo Mountain Resort, for example, has five magic carpet lifts, making it easier for kids to get up the slope. "Using the magic carpet removes the fatigue issues so kids are still fresh—and ready to learn—when they get to the top of the slope," says Saylor.

If you find a gentle, low-pitch run that a chairlift services, ride the chairlift after you discuss a few safety rules, such as:

1. butts back as soon as you sit down,
2. no throwing anything off the lift,
3. no kicking skis together.

Chairlifts with safety bars are best for kids. Ideally, try to position them in the chairlift so their legs straddle the vertical bar (the piece that connects the safety bar to the footrest), as this will block them from sliding under the safety bar and off of the chairlift.

Once atop a gentle slope, have kids get into the French fry position and give them a little push. Skiing slightly in front of them will encourage them to look forward and enable you to offer praise and coaching tips en route down the slope. Having already practiced the pizza position, they should be able to slow down by doing "pizza" as needed... or as gently reminded.

You may see some parents using a "ski leash," which

## TEACHING TIPS

- Leave the poles at home, as kids naturally find their balance by moving their hands; poles tend to hinder this process.
- When talking to kids on the slopes, be sure to bend down so you are at eye level with them and remove your goggles or sunglasses so they can see your eyes.
- Ask the ski patrol or ski school instructors for a Skiers Responsibility Code card and learn the seven rules of the code with your kids.
- Wearing a helmet is the safest way to protect against head injuries and all skiers and riders should consider wearing them. Please be a role model for kids and wear a helmet yourself.

is a harness the child wears with two long leashes the parent holds while skiing behind. This may help regulate your child's speed and direction, especially if he or she is still learning to slow down. When using a leash, be mindful of maintaining ample slack so as not to pull your child backward, and sufficient distance so as not to fall on top of your child if he or she should stop short. Always detach and roll up the leashes before using any lift.

Generally, after their first falls, kids become fearless of falling, especially if you are lighthearted about it. Blaming snow snakes for falls works wonders (you know... those hard-to-see white snakes that pop up from the snow, grab your ski pants and make you fall). In fact, we often name the snow snakes and have elaborate conversations about them while riding the chairlift.

If skiing with more than two kids, it works well if they ski single file behind you. This formation is easier to manage if you discuss some rules beforehand, such as: stop when you stop and always stop on the side of a slope in view of other uphill skiers. Given that most kids want to go first behind you, try to be creative in making the "last place" skier important to the group. For example, designate the last skier as the ski patrol who monitors the group and alerts others if someone falls. This works so well that kids in my class often beg to be last so they can be ski patrol!

Smaller kids have a tendency to sit back in their skis. To correct this, try the "jelly bean" drill. Place a jelly bean between the inside of their boot's tongue and their shin, and tell them to squish the jelly bean by pressing their shin against it. Voila! They are instantly skiing, while applying forward pressure to their boot, which is the desired position. Whether kids eat the squished jellybean at the end of the run is up to them!

Teaching kids about the "turning button" eases them into making smooth, rounded turns. The turning button is located on the outside of ski boots over the anklebone. To turn, start to make a pizza wedge, lean to your right side and touch your right hand to your right boot button (uphill hand should not drop). This promotes positive weight transfer onto their turning ski and a smooth, rounded turn. Play follow the leader while skiing, and alternate pressing your left and right turning buttons as you ski down the slope. Pretty soon, the kids are making smooth, wide turns.

While every child brings a unique skill set to the sport of skiing, one universal truth holds for every kid: when they say they are cold, they mean it. So heed their warning and take a hot chocolate break. In fact, you should be prepared to take regular breaks to recharge everyone's enthusiasm. If I am teaching on a particularly cold day, I keep a big thermos of hot chocolate (along with cups and marshmallows) in a cubby in the lodge, so when the kids get cold, we dash in, serve up hot chocolate and talk about "snow snakes" while we warm up.

I hope that some of these tips will help to make you and your kids' time on the snow more fun. Think snow and enjoy! ☑

*Billie Munro Audia is a Safety Ambassador on the ski patrol at Okemo Mountain Resort and has taught skiing to kids at the Dartmouth Skiway in New Hampshire and at Winter Park in Colorado. Billie is also a technology lawyer, freelance writer, triathlete, and mom. She and her family live in Hanover, NH.*

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