



# First Tracks

*A parent's guide to getting kids on skis, and keeping them there for life*

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THE AGENCY VAIL

# Why I wrote this

*My parents met on a chairlift in Vail. I was lucky enough to be born into a skiing family.*

I believe my job as a real estate agent is to help you move from the life you live to the life you dream about. Now I get to ski with my parents while introducing my own kids to the sport, and that's a dream come true. If your family's dream is a weekend place in the mountains, or making the move for good, I'd love to help you get there.

We were weekend warriors from Boulder. My parents loved skiing and shared that love with my brother and me. I loved it, worked hard, and eventually made the U.S. Ski Team, skiing moguls on the World Cup. When I retired, I became a Program Director and Head Coach at Ski & Snowboard Club Vail, where I coached kids who went on to the U.S. Ski Team and the Olympics.

**Here's what coaching taught me: if kids don't love it, they will never work hard enough to get good at it. Love comes first. Skill follows.**



Then I had my own kids. Our daughters, Darwin and Andi, are going to have a hard time answering the question "When did you start skiing?" My wife, Rachel, skied until a few weeks before each of them was born. Their first winter, I Nordic skied with them on my chest and ski toured with them in a backpack. Darwin was on alpine skis at a year and a half, and Andi will be too. Today Darwin is five, and she rips. Last season, at four years old, she was skiing with parallel shins and enough inside ski pressure to leave arcs (see the cover photo).

This guide is for parents who ski and want to share it with their kids, whether you're here year round, every weekend, or once a season. The technical stuff matters far less than you think. What matters is building a passion by keeping it fun, keeping them warm, and stopping before they want to.

And remember the real goal: raising a lifelong ski buddy. My parents are 80, and they're still my favorite people to ski with. A World Cup career is the blink of an eye in a lifetime of skiing. It should not be the goal.

See you on the hill.

Michael

# The only rule that matters

*Your goal for the first season is not a good skier. It's a kid who begs to go back.*

## Quit while they're smiling

The biggest mistake parents make is staying out one run too long. End every day on a high note, even if that means 45 minutes total. A short great day beats a long miserable one every time.

## Warm, fed, and rested

Almost every meltdown on the mountain is cold hands, an empty stomach, or a skipped nap. Fix those first, before you assume it's fear or frustration.

## Play, don't instruct

Young kids don't learn from explanations. They learn by copying you and by playing games. Swap "bend your knees" for "can you touch your boots?"

## Mileage beats perfection

Time on snow is the single biggest factor in how fast a child progresses. Lots of short, easy days build more skill than a few long, ambitious ones.

## Celebrate effort out loud

Praise the trying, not just the result. "You kept going even after you fell" builds a skier for life.

## Your stoke matters!

If you don't live in the mountains or get to ski a lot, make sure you're taking time to maintain your own love of the sport. If you love it, your kids will too!

### FROM THE COACH

At Ski & Snowboard Club Vail, I coached kids who became U.S. Ski Team members and Olympians. My whole coaching philosophy comes down to one line: if kids don't love it, they will never work hard enough to get good at it.

# Check your ego at the base

*"My kid skied a black run at four." That's not your kid's milestone. That's your ego.*

Every parent feels the pull. Another family's five-year-old is on the blues, and suddenly yours "should" be too. Resist it. Pushing milestones is the fastest way to build a scared skier with bad habits, and the fastest way to lose a ski buddy.

## Why low angle wins

Gentle terrain does something steep terrain can't. When the slope is mellow, kids **seek speed**. To go faster, they naturally run their skis flatter and closer together, toward parallel, and they **lean into the front of the boot**. That's exactly the stance every coach is trying to build.

Steeper terrain has the opposite effect. Kids get scared, so they lean back, widen into a big defensive wedge, and fight the hill. Those habits take years to undo.

## What this looks like on the hill

- Spend far more time on greens than feels necessary
- Let them go fast on easy terrain, with room to run out
- Move up a level only when they're bored, not when you are
- If their stance falls apart, go back down a level
- Measure progress in smiles and miles, not trail colors



# Is my child ready?

*There's no magic age. There's a child who's curious, comfortable in the cold, and having fun.*

| AGE            | WHAT TO EXPECT                                                                                                 | YOUR FOCUS                                                                                                                        |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Under 3</b> | Let's be honest: skiing this young is mostly for Instagram and parental pride. 20 to 45 minutes is a full day. | Optional. If it's easy and fun, go for it. If not, don't worry. Kids who start at 3 or 4 catch up fast.                           |
| <b>3 to 4</b>  | Can follow simple games and copy movements. Starting to wedge. Gets cold and tired quickly.                    | Magic carpet, straight runs to a natural stop, the first wedge. One to two hours with breaks.                                     |
| <b>5 to 7</b>  | Stronger, braver, ready for real instruction. Many kids link wedge turns and ride chairlifts this season.      | Turning and stopping on command, chairlift routine, easy green runs. Group lessons work well here.                                |
| <b>8 to 9</b>  | Can process feedback and practice on purpose. Learns quickly with good coaching.                               | Skis come closer together, the first parallel turns, blues, and some fun terrain like small rollers and trails through the trees. |

## Signs they're ready

- Walks and runs confidently, and can climb stairs
- Tolerates wearing a helmet, mittens, and goggles
- Can follow a simple two-step instruction
- Is curious about skiing (watching you, asking to try)

## Signs to wait a few weeks

- Upset by boots or helmet even at home
- Can't stay warm for 30 minutes outside
- Fear that grows each outing rather than shrinking

*Waiting is not failing. A month later, the same child often loves it.*

### WHAT WE DID

Darwin was on alpine skis at a year and a half, and Andi will be too, but only because it was easy. We live in the mountains, so it was fun and low stress: skiing off the back deck, sliding around the neighborhood, even letting the dog tow Darwin on skis. If you can't do that, you're not missing anything. Start when it's fun for everyone.

# Gear that actually matters

*Get the boots right and almost everything else gets easier.*

## Boots: the big one

Boots that are too big are the most common gear problem with kids. They make it nearly impossible to control the ski. Resist buying "room to grow."

- Toes should lightly touch the front when standing tall, and pull back slightly when they bend their knees
- One thin ski sock only, never two pairs or cotton
- Long underwear does not go inside the boot! Pull it up above the boot line to avoid a painful seam.

## Skis

For beginners, shorter is easier. Somewhere between chest and chin height is a good starting point. Soft, short skis are easier to turn and stop.

## Rent or buy?

Kids outgrow gear fast. Many local shops offer season-long junior rental programs that are well worth it for families who ski often.

## Warmth and protection

- **Helmet:** snug, level, and worn every time
- **Goggles:** fit the helmet with no gap at the forehead
- **Mittens over gloves:** warmer and easier for small hands
- **Layers, no cotton:** base layer, light fleece, waterproof shell
- **Balaclava** instead of a scarf or neck gaiter. It's by far the best option under a helmet.
- **Sunscreen and lip balm:** the sun at 10,000 feet is strong

## Teaching aids

**Edgie-Wedgie** tip connectors (clips that hold ski tips together) help some young kids hold a wedge. Use them as training wheels and take them off once the wedge comes naturally.

**Harnesses and leashes** can help control speed on a crowded run. Use them sparingly. Kids on a leash tend to lean back against it, which builds the exact habit you're trying to avoid.

**Skip poles** until kids are turning comfortably, usually around age 6 to 8.

# The progression

*Six stages from the living room to the chairlift. Move on when they're ready, not when you are.*

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## 1 At home

Put boots on in the living room and clomp around. Click into skis on the carpet and practice lifting one foot. Watch ski videos together. The goal is that gear feels familiar before they ever see snow.

*Ready to move on: they put boots on without a fight.*

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## 2 Flat snow

Walk with one ski on, then both. Shuffle, glide, and sidestep up a tiny bump. Practice falling down and getting up (skis sideways to the hill, push up with hands). Make it a game every time.

*Ready to move on: they can get up on their own and glide a few feet.*

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## 3 Gentle slope and magic carpet

Choose a slope that flattens out at the bottom so it stops them naturally. Ski straight down in a tall, relaxed stance with hands forward. Then introduce the wedge ("pizza") to slow down and stop.

*Ready to move on: they can stop with a wedge when you ask, not just when the hill runs out.*

### WHAT WE DID

Our first "slope" was the back deck and the neighborhood.



## 4 First turns

Kids go where they look. Have them look at you, a tree, or a cone, and the skis will follow. Lead with easy, wide wedge turns on the same gentle slope. Ski backward in front of them if you can, or have them follow your tracks.

*Ready to move on: they link turns both ways and can stop on command.*

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## 5 Chairlift and green runs

Practice the routine before the first ride: look back for the chair, sit all the way back, bar down, no wiggling, tips up to unload, ski away from the ramp. Tell the lift operator it's their first ride. Pick the widest, mellowest green on the mountain and plan to do it again and again.

*Ready to move on: they ski a full green run, turning and stopping, without help.*

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## 6 Toward parallel

As speed and confidence grow, the wedge naturally gets smaller and the skis start to match in the second half of each turn. Don't force it, and don't rush to steeper runs. Mileage on low-angle terrain, where kids can chase speed with their weight forward, does most of the work. This is a great time for a few lessons.

*Ready for more: skis come together in most turns and they ask for "the fun runs."*



# Games that teach

*Every one of these quietly builds a real skiing skill.*

| GAME                               | HOW TO PLAY                                                         | WHAT IT TEACHES                           |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| <b>Red light, green light</b>      | You call it, they go or stop. Add "yellow light" for slow.          | Stopping on command, speed control        |
| <b>Follow the leader</b>           | They copy your turns, your arm positions, even your silly noises.   | Turn shape, line choice, rhythm           |
| <b>Touch your boots</b>            | Reach down and touch boot tops while sliding, then stand tall.      | Flexing ankles and knees, staying forward |
| <b>Airplane</b>                    | Arms out like wings, tip the wings to turn.                         | Balance, upper body steering              |
| <b>Pick up the glove</b>           | Drop a glove on the snow and have them pick it up as they slide by. | Balance, getting low and recovering       |
| <b>Hands on the steering wheel</b> | Hold an imaginary wheel out front and "drive" down the hill.        | Hands forward, which keeps weight forward |
| <b>Slalom</b>                      | Turn around gloves, cones, or trees. Add a race against the clock.  | Linking turns, looking ahead              |
| <b>Animal tracks</b>               | Find the bunny, the bear, and the snake trail in the trees.         | Confidence on varied terrain              |



*Darwin at 2 years old being pulled by Calle in the neighborhood*

# When things go sideways

*The most common problems, and what usually fixes them.*

## Leaning back ("sitting in the back seat")

Usually fear or terrain that's too steep. Go easier. Cue "hands on the steering wheel" or "push your shins into the front of your boots." Check that boots aren't too big.

## Too fast, can't stop

The slope is too steep for their skills. Go back to one that runs out flat. Practice red light, green light until stopping is automatic.

## Skis crossing

Often tired legs, or the wedge is too big. Take a break. A tip connector can help for a few runs.

## "I can't get up"

Skis sideways across the hill, below their body, then push up with hands. Help only after they've tried, so they learn they can do it.

## Tears and meltdowns

Run the checklist: cold, hungry, tired, needs the bathroom. Go inside, warm up, snack, then decide. Sometimes the best call is to be done for the day, happily.

## Fear

Never push through real fear. Name it, go back to terrain where they felt brave, and let them decide when to try again. Confidence comes back faster than you'd expect.

## "I don't want to go"

Shorten the day, bring a friend, add a reward like a favorite lunch spot. Kids who ski with friends almost always ski more.

## Too much coaching

If you've given more than one tip in a run, you've given too many. One idea per run, then just ski.

# Lessons, parents, or both?

*Both. Instructors build the technique. Parents build the love of it.*

## Why ski school works

- Kids often listen to an instructor better than to a parent
- Skiing with other kids is motivating and fun
- Instructors have proven progressions and the right terrain
- It gives you a few hours to ski your own runs

## Why your time matters

- Mileage: practicing what they learned in lessons
- Shared memories, which is the real reason we do this
- You know your child's moods, limits, and motivators

A useful rhythm: a lesson in the morning, then ski with your child in the afternoon so they can show you what they learned.

## Learning in the Vail Valley

**Vail:** Children's ski school runs out of the Golden Peak and Lionshead Children's Centers. Plan to arrive at least 30 minutes before lessons start, and pick up rentals the day before when you can.

**Beaver Creek:** A strong family mountain with dedicated children's ski school and learning terrain.

**Book early.** Holiday weeks and Presidents' Day fill up well in advance.

**Check pass options.** Young children's pass and lift ticket policies change, so confirm current details with the resort before the season.

### LOCAL FAVORITES

Red Buffalo in Beaver Creek is an amazing place for kids. Jackrabbit Alley is Darwin's favorite.

# The secret weapon: Nordic

*Cross-country skiing might be the best thing you can do for a young alpine skier.*

## Why it works so well for kids

- **Balance and glide.** Kids learn to ride a moving, sliding ski on flat ground, which is the foundation of everything in alpine skiing.
- **No fear factor.** Flat, rolling terrain means no speed anxiety, so kids relax and play.
- **They stay warm.** Kids are always moving, so cold is less of a problem than on a chairlift.
- **Independence.** Kids can move on their own power, go where they want, and explore.
- **Low cost, low hassle.** No lift tickets, lighter gear, and often trails close to home.
- **Everyone can come.** Grandparents, toddlers in a pulk, the dog on some trails.



## Getting started

**Gear:** Waxless classic skis (with a fish-scale or skin grip zone) and simple, soft boots. Skip poles at first so kids use their legs and balance.

**Games:** "Scooter" with one ski off, follow the leader through the trees, tag, and treasure hunts along the trail.

**Keep it short:** Same rules as alpine. Snacks, warm hands, and quit while they're smiling.

## Nordic in the Vail Valley

- Vail Nordic Center
- Beaver Creek Nordic at McCoy Park
- Ski & Snowboard Club Vail cross country programs, including Future Stars for younger kids
- Maloit Park in Minturn, home of junior Nordic racing

### WHAT WE DO

Our girls were on Nordic trails their first winter, riding on my chest in a carrier. Darwin did the SSCV Nordic Future Stars program at four years old. I coach it.

# The ski day checklist

*Pin it to the mudroom wall.*

## Pack the night before

- ☐ Helmet and goggles (try them on together)
- ☐ Boots, skis, and passes
- ☐ Base layers, fleece, shell, and snow pants
- ☐ One pair of thin ski socks, plus a spare
- ☐ Mittens, plus a spare pair
- ☐ Balaclava
- ☐ Sunscreen and lip balm
- ☐ Hand warmers
- ☐ Snacks they love, and water
- ☐ Tissues

## On the mountain

- ☐ Bathroom stop before boots go on
- ☐ Snack break every hour
- ☐ Check hands and toes for cold at every break
- ☐ One coaching tip per run, at most
- ☐ Go back to easier terrain when it stops being fun
- ☐ End on a great run
- ☐ Celebrate (hot chocolate counts)

## Michael's top three

1. Snacks and special treats. We are not above bribery!
2. Quit while they're smiling.
3. Easier terrain fixes most problems.

# The long game

*The goal isn't an Olympic champion. It's a lifelong ski buddy.*



My parents are 80, and they're still my favorite people to ski with. Some of the best days I have on the mountain now are with them and Darwin together: three generations on the same run.

That's what all of this is for. Not trail colors, not race results, not the photo of a two-year-old in a tiny helmet.

Keep it fun. Keep it mellow. Let them fall in love with it. If they want to chase gates someday, the love will carry them. If they don't, you'll still have someone to ski with for the rest of your life.

That's the best outcome there is.

LET'S TALK

# Dreaming of a place in the mountains?

Whether it's a weekend ski home or a full-time move, let's talk about what that could look like for your family.

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