



# SKI



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## To Raise Lifelong Skiers, You Have to Make It Fun (Or Else!)

As one dad found out, that means ditching your agenda in favor of your kiddo's.

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Houston, we have a problem. Last winter, my 5-year-old daughter Ingrid's beloved "Buster" program—that is, *Stowe, Vt.*'s season-long, same-coach-same-kids, weekend lessons—was canceled due to the pandemic. What would she do on weekends? Without her Buster posse, with whom would she ski?

It turned out to be me, her dad. Together, she and I launched our own program, which we dubbed "Papa-Busters." I skied with Ingrid every single Sunday for the entire winter. Thank you, pandemic, for the opportunity.

Heading into Papa-Busters, I have to admit to having some trepidation. Despite being a full-time, **PSIA-certified ski instructor** and a PSIA clinician who trains professional instructors how to teach kids to ski, the fact remains: It's different when it's your own kid.

We have all seen miserable parents with screaming children in base areas. Parents for whom skiing ranks up there in importance with breathing and who therefore want—no, *need*—to share and pass along to their offspring their own love of mountains and winter sports. With that much pressure on the situation, it's no wonder that things can sometimes go terribly wrong.

So I wondered, how can I ensure that my Sunday sessions with Ingrid would result not in stress, frustration, and tears, but rather in smiles and fun? How do I raise a kid who loves to ski?

In the end, Ingrid and I had an incredible season, but it required a reorganization of priorities on my part. Here's what I figured out—tips that can help every parent who heads to the slopes with kids in tow.

## **Be prepared.**

“Have plans A, B, and C, all the way to Z,” says Kevin Jordan, a member of the PSIA National Team, coordinator of the children's ski school at **Snowmass, Colo.**, and a dad of two. Anything can happen out there, from changes in the weather to shifts in your child's energy level. When Jordan skis with his young kids, besides properly outfitting them and filling his pockets with extra hand warmers and gummies, he prepares for all possible contingencies. “Be prepared to change plans quickly,” he says.

## **Leave your expectations at home.**

How do you spell success? Number of runs, hours on snow, wolfing lunch on the chairlift? Forget all that, because they no longer apply. What does matter? Whether Ingrid finishes her day with energy and a smile. Says Jordan, “If they want to hang on a tree trail, we hang on a tree trail. If they want to show me something, they show me.” Your new success meter: how much fun your kid has.

## **Ski varied terrain.**

The wide green “Easy Street” trail at **Stowe** doesn't make for sexy social media posts. But vandals carved SpongeBob on a birch tree on the side of Easy Street, and Ingrid never tired of “guiding” me to it. (Note to vandals: Tacking a SpongeBob toy or picture to the tree would work just as well.)

Snow pros and coaches have known for years that drills on easy terrain build sturdy foundations. “When in doubt, hold back,” advises Jordan. Pushing harder terrain too soon promotes bad habits, like power wedging from the back seat. Two hundred Easy Street runs later, Ingrid has honed a rock-solid base. When she’s winning World Cup races in 20 years, I’ll be sure to thank SpongeBob.

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## **Break before breakdown.**

Ingrid and I took breaks before she ran out of energy, not after. We avoided like the plague (or, because it’s 2021, the coronavirus) the urge to sneak in “one more run.” You know your kid best, but in my experience, when it comes to young kids, squeezing in one more run can be a poor gamble.

## **Celebrate the small stuff.**

When Ingrid hit a jump, discovered a new woods trail, skied a black diamond (or any new trail), we celebrated, high-fived, or cheers-ed over hot cocoa. Her season became one filled with accomplishment because we shined a light on whatever new skill or trick she acquired.

## **Go big ... when conditions are right.**

Everyone loves freshies, right? Actually, deep powder isn’t necessarily easy for little ones with their still-developing motor skills, smaller muscles, and sense of coordination. For weeks last season, Ingrid had her eye on Hackett’s Highway, a double-black under Stowe’s Mountain Triple. When I finally relented, it was a mild day two days after a storm, when the trail was nicely skied off but not icy. Conditions, the weather, and, most importantly, her energy level, were on point. And she shredded it to the whoops of lift riders above us.

Here’s the rub, however: after Hackett’s, I stifled my “proud Dad” excitement and didn’t gripe or grouse when she brought me back to Easy Street instead of lapping Hackett’s for the rest of the day. When you’re 5, a SpongeBob visit may be just as inspiring as a double-black.

I never thought I'd hear myself say—and proudly, I might add—that I skied Easy Street 10 times in one day. That I quit at lunchtime on a powder day—after not one, but two, cocoa breaks. Or that I opted out of last chair. But I'm in Papa-Busters now, and times have changed. If you want your kids to love skiing, Jordan points out, you need to be patient.

Meanwhile, Ingrid's season-long program is back on the menu at Stowe this winter. But guess what? Ingrid has informed me she'd rather ski with me. Sounds like Papa-Busters was a rousing success.

*Mark Aiken is a freelance writer from Richmond, Vt. He is a professional ski instructor and serves on the PSIA-AASI ACE (Advanced Children's Educator) team. He spent the summer rigging an AT binding for Ingrid's size 8 boots, as well as a "Papa-poma" tow that clips to his backpack—just in case she tires out on the ascent.*

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