



Gunnar Aiken takes his parents skiing.

9 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PARENTS...
 From an Instructor Who Is One
 By Mark Aiken

Many snowsports instructors suspect that some parents just want to dump their kids in lessons so they can have a few hours of time away. Now that I am a parent, I can confirm: these instructors are *one hundred percent correct!*

I have always known about families; after all, I grew up in one. But my parenting journey, which began four years ago, enlightened me in unexpected ways and gave me a glimpse into the experiences of many guests – things I never considered and certainly didn't understand as deeply until I had kids of my own.

Don't get me wrong: one does NOT need to become

a parent to be an outstanding children's instructor. In fact, many of the best *aren't* parents. Says Kelley Blaine, manager of children's programs at Vermont's Stowe Mountain Resort, "Non-parent instructors bring a fresh perspective. Where parents might tend to 'parent' more, non-parents might 'play' more."

However, being an instructor and a parent has given me insight – and led to mistakes I never thought I'd make (cue the story of when I brought my 3-year-old son skiing with his boots on the wrong feet). Here are nine things I learned about the people who bring their kids to our ski and ride schools when I became one.



Stowe's Kelley Blaine offers keen perspective on the parental mindset.

1. YES, PARENTS SOMETIMES "DUMP" THE KIDS SO THEY CAN HAVE JUST A FEW HOURS TO THEMSELVES.

Before parenthood, I was bitter toward parents who dumped their kids on us. "Moooooommmmmmyyyyyy!" they'd scream as the parents walked away. Well, I'm here to tell you the other side of the story. "Parenting is constant; it is nonstop," says Christina Timrud, who, for the past 12 years, has been the head teacher at The Children's School, a preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in South Burlington, Vermont.

Sometimes, we just need a little me-time. My sister jokingly tells me that I have nobody to blame but myself for becoming a parent. But I still need breaks!

HOW YOU CAN HELP: "Remember," says Kelley, "parents are doing this because it's something they love. The goal is to do it as a family. I don't see it as 'dumping'; they are passionate about skiing and riding, and they want their kids to have this in their lives."



Preschool teacher Christina Timrud knows from experience that parents can use a little extra help – and reminders – from time to time.



It's not always easy to get a child from the parking lot to the children's center. Here, author Mark Aiken gives Gunnar a tow.

2. GETTING TO A RESORT WITH A FAMILY IS DIFFICULT.

I'm talking Everest-level difficult. Or, more specifically, I'm an unpaid Sherpa being subjected to mental torture as I make my epic trek to the summit – that is, your ski and ride school's children's center. I want my kid to be fresh for his lesson. That's not possible after we force-march our 4-year-old across a parking lot wider than the Khumbu Glacier. I'd carry him, but I have his gear, my gear, boot bags, and a baby to carry too. We've tried balancing skis on a baby stroller, which gets stuck in slush, doesn't go up stairs, and – worst of all – doesn't muffle my kid's anguished cries.

When we finally get from car to you, he is exhausted – and so am I. "I respect this," says Kelley. "It's extremely difficult." Resorts across the country strive for accessibility, build drop-off zones, and try to make it easier for families. But the fact remains: getting a family to a winter resort is simply not easy.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: "We can make it seamless once they do get to us," says Kelley. Snowsports pros are adept at turning challenging situations around. If everyone involved – that is, sales clerks, supervisors, check-in people, and, finally, instructors – do everything possible to help families once they make contact, the on-snow experiences can override the challenges they overcame to get here.

TAKE THE PLUNGE AND BECOME A SPECIALIST

If you have a knack for teaching children – or want to develop the skills and sense of rapport that will make young students (and their parents) squeal with delight at the thought of a lesson with you – why not pursue a children's specialist credential? Check with your division regarding prerequisites for seeking Children's Specialist 1 or 2 certificates; some may require that you attain a discipline-specific Level I or II certification.



<http://tiny.cc/ChildrensSpecialist2>

3. PARENTING KILLS BRAIN CELLS.

As a parent, I can look you in the face. I can give you my undivided attention. I can listen. However, I can... not... remember what you just told me. My kid is clinging to my leg, my wife and the baby are in the car waiting, and I still have to get to the store in order to feed both kids by 6 p.m. before they both turn into dinosaur-hyenas, a squealing monster that changes mood every two minutes... and doesn't respect a reasonable bedtime.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: Be clear and succinct when you talk to a distracted parent (aka most of us). I assure you, parents *are* interested and they want to listen. They just can't at this moment. Write it down: directions, pick-up times, or what was covered in a child's lesson. At a quiet moment, they will pull your notes out of a pocket, and they will greatly appreciate your effort. Except...

4. PARENTS CAN'T READ.

No matter how clear and how well-written your resort's signage, brochure, website, and collateral materials, parents are incapable of internalizing your ski and ride school's policies, procedures, and messaging. Your resort spells it out in the clearest possible terms; parents forget.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: Preschool teacher Christina is a new parent who has sent hundreds of messages home to parents. "I have a better understanding of where families are coming from," she says. "The 24/7 aspect of parenting."

Christina's school always has extra clothes for kids whose parents forgot to pack something. "Those little things never bothered me," she says. Great instructors adopt a similar approach. When parents make a mistake, big deal: it's a mistake. Educate them on the right approach; show them the signs and the brochure. But spare them any attitude.

5. MISSION IMPOSSIBLE, PART I: GETTING KIDS TO LESSONS ON TIME.

On nights before a big event (like a ski or snowboard lesson), kids get excited, and the last thing they want to do is sleep. By morning they can barely wake up. Breakfast becomes a struggle because they are



On the night before an exciting day of skiing, the last thing a kid might want to do is sleep.

over-tired, and then – in preparation for the mountain environment – parents dress them in clothes they aren't used to wearing.

Getting dressed becomes a full-fledged battle, and the battle escalates when strapping them into the car seat. And this is all before a family even leaves the house/hotel!

HOW YOU CAN HELP: When a supervisor plugs a late, over-tired, under-nourished kid into your group – and your whole group dynamic crashes – please... don't hold this against the kid's parents. Okay, fine; silently blame the parents. Just don't blame the kid.

Most likely the new arrival is fully shell-shocked, and maybe it's time for the whole group to take a break. Often, the latecomer assimilates once he or she gets acclimated. Sometimes you need reinforcements from your school's supervisory team or another instructor. Regardless of what it ultimately takes to get your late arriver going, it almost always involves patience and flexibility.

6. MISSION IMPOSSIBLE, PART II: MEETING MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF PHYSICAL NEEDS.

As a parent, not only am I going to be late, my kid is going to be tired and hungry, his boots will be on the wrong feet, and all of his layers will be twisted, wrinkled, scrunched, and bunched. That's because, as he dresses before his lesson, he sees his toy piano – the one he hasn't touched since last June – and decides that his inner Mozart is emerging right now.

After murmuring "Serenity now" 150 times while waiting for the closing movement of the symphony, I attempt to extricate him from the piano and into his long underwear. World War III breaks out in my living room.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: Hopefully most ski and ride schools realize that, without rest, food in their systems, warm and dry clothes, goggles, and equipment that fits, our students aren't set up for success. As pros, we should have a quick look at student clothing and equipment. If you have a chance to converse with parents, ask about breakfast and the night's sleep – and confirm that these skis actually belong to Johnny (and not Johnny's brother).



4-year-old Gunnar Aiken is game to take on the slopes; negotiating the bathroom might be a different story.

If anything is awry, enlist your supervisor's assistance to get the child outfitted, fed, etc. Although parents might want the child to dive into the lesson, we instructors know from experience that nothing positive will occur until those lowest rungs of Maslow's hierarchy are climbed.

7 THE YOUNGEST KIDS IN OUR LESSONS CAN BARELY NAVIGATE THE BATHROOM.

My 4-year-old is bathroom-independent at preschool and at home. But every time I send him into lessons in those big snow pants, his long johns, and ski boots, I silently know the truth: the kid can hardly get himself in and out of those snow pants – let alone get them back on by himself. Christina says of the 3-year-olds in her preschool program: “Two years ago they were babies!”

HOW YOU CAN HELP: Different children's centers have different protocols regarding bathrooms, so make sure you are versed in your home program's policies. Be supportive. Ask kids if they need assistance. Give them privacy and time if they need it – but check in. Curtail any fooling around in the bathroom, which is a place for taking care of business, washing hands, and moving out.

Above all, if you have 3- and 4-year-olds, most parents didn't “lie” when they said they were potty-trained. In truth, these kids probably *are* potty trained... at home. At the mountain, with us, they're in an unfamiliar bathroom... wearing unfamiliar boots and 19 layers of warm clothes. Accidents are bound to happen.

8 PARENTS ARE THE WORLD'S MOST EXHAUSTED PEOPLE.

“Parenting is intense,” says Christina. “It's nonstop; it's constant.” Meanwhile, kids thrive on routines and familiar surroundings. Is it good for them to periodically shake all this up? Absolutely. Is it easy? No. Bringing kids on a vacation only adds to a parent's exhaustion. It's called vacation, but the work and stress levels of taking kids on holiday are on par with being president of a small country.

How you can help: Understand that parents choose skiing and riding with their families, but skiing and riding are not the easiest choices available – not by a long shot. After my kids were born, I thought of the families who have been regulars at my home mountain; parents who have brought two, three, and four kids to our resort weekend after weekend for years. Now I thank them. Bringing kids to mountains ain't easy. Appreciate the choice they're making – and let them know it.

9 PARENTS FEEL UNDER THE MICROSCOPE.

It's in magazines, books, the news, and social media – all the things parents “should” be doing with and for their kids. At the grocery checkout line, at the grandparents', and at the playground, everyone is an expert. They all know better than me what's best for my kid – and all of my shortcomings as a parent.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: “These aren't our children,” says Kelley. “We need to respect how others want to raise them.” Therefore, as snowsports professionals, when we educate parents about what is best for kids in snowsports, do so respectfully and not condescendingly.

Professional instructors should and will have recommendations. Maybe you noticed a child's snowboard seemed too long or his or her ski boots are too big. Maybe you know what terrain is appropriate for parents to ski with kids after their lesson. Make your recommendations based on what you did and saw. Don't be accusatory. Leave the scolding to the mothers-in-law!

TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND RELISH THE OPPORTUNITY TO EDUCATE

Above all, what strikes me over and over about parenthood is the connection I have with these tiny people. Anytime I see them in pain, in peril, or otherwise having difficulty, I want to help. I often have to force myself to let them figure life out for themselves – and this is part of the reason I put them in lessons. “The parent-child connection is immense,” says Christina.

As snowsports professionals, we have an opportunity to give an amazing gift to families: the ability to share the mountains in winter. “Kids' instructors don't just teach kids,” says Kelley. “They educate parents. Having a good dynamic with parents, being willing to work with families, and partnering with them can make the difference in their mountain experience.”

Mark Aiken is a Level III alpine instructor and a member of the Eastern Division ACE (Advanced Children's Educator) team. He leads a weekly kid's clinic for staff at his home mountain, Stowe. An endurance runner, Mark is currently training for his 22nd marathon... all while balancing the ultimate endurance sport – parenting.