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Kids learn the ropes at ski school in Steamboat Springs, Colo.

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PARK CITY, Utah — Hindsight is always 20-20, especially when you're talking about teaching kids to ski. Like a lot of parents who love to ski, I figured I could teach my children myself. And I tried. But looking back now, I wish I'd put them in group lessons much sooner, when they were 6 or 7, blank slates waiting to be written on.

It took me a while to realize that when your kids are skiing the slopes with an enthusiastic young instructor — slip-sliding through the trees, puffing fresh air, whooping and hollering and pretending that small bumps are Olympic obstacles — they'll learn in a hurry, and they'll love it, too. Like any sport, an inspiring, encouraging coach and a week on the slopes teamed up with other kids is a winning combination.

Later on, standing in line to enroll my 12-year-old, I discovered that for many parents, group lessons for kids has another benefit: It's as much about giving parents some much-needed time on their own as it is about keeping the kids happy and busy. Which, in this busy age, is a bonus.

But some ski schools are better organized than others, and more successful, too. They're not content to merely print brochures, post prices on a website and hire instructors. They define a core mission, set specific learning goals and create a multi-layered plan to make it happen. And how does the bewildered parent find one of these top-rated ski schools?

With no classes to sit in on, textbooks to read or lesson plans to review, you have to do some digging, compare the differences and see what style fits your child. While there are no official rankings for children's ski programs, parents' comments, ski blogs and websites offer a clue. Here's how some of the most praised — and popular — ski schools succeed.

For Tom Pettigrew, director of Skier Services at Park City Resort, small classes are the single factor that sets the stage for successful group learning. "We keep our group lessons at five or fewer children, no exceptions. Ever," he says. "If we can't divide the kids evenly, we'll assign an instructor to three kids, or two, or even one," he says. That way every child is guaranteed what amounts to an mini-private lesson and individual coaching."

The advantages are many, he believes. Small classes make it easy for instructors to get to know each child, and to earn that child's trust, essential for learning new skills in what is often a scary mountain setting. The kids will ski off the summit, cross steep slopes on a narrow cat-track, and snowplow in the trees. "Small classes are a no-brainer," says Pettigrew. "That's why college students who pick a small school with classes of 30 do better than they would in a huge school with 400-seat lecture halls."

Small classes also means more of them, which makes it easier to group together kids of similar ages, temperament, confidence levels and ski skills. "Say that 100 kids have signed up," says Pettigrew. "With five in a class you'd have 20 possible groups. If the kids feel as if they're hanging out with friends, they'll have more fun."

How do group lessons compare with private lessons, generally considered by many parents — and skiers — as the gold standard?

"I never recommend private lessons for kids," says Nancy Gray, senior instructor at the top-ranked Ski and Snowboard Kids' School, at Steamboat Resort, in Steamboat Springs, Colo.

"Kids benefit from being with other kids," says Gray, now in her 40th year teaching children. "That's because they're much better at watching and copying each other than they are at listening to what an adult is telling them. It feels less like a lesson, and more like an adventure."

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Steamboat's class sizes are larger, from six or seven kids to as many as nine during jammed-up holiday weeks. But Steamboat's instructors make a point of meeting and talking to each child ahead of time, to see what makes him or her tick. It helps them to assess each child, and put him or her with other similar kids. "We sometimes divide them by boys and girls, because the kids themselves like it that way," says Gray.

Because Steamboat attracts families who come and stay a week, many of the kids in the program are there long enough to stay with the same instructor nearly every day, says Gray, who takes the long view. "I always remind parents who want to ski with their kids after class, to stay on the same trails they skied in class, and not take them up to steeper, harder terrain. If the kids are afraid and they start sitting back on their skis — leaning back is the hardest bad habit to break — the teacher has to start all over again the next day, to restore a sense of confidence.'

At the Kids' Ski & Snowboard clinics at Taos Ski Valley, in Taos, N.M., the instructors are at the heart of the program, according to Marketing Director Amanda Blake, whose grandfather, Ernie Blake, founded the ski area's world-famous Ernie Blake ski school. "The instructors are our greatest strength," she says. "Making sure the kids like what they're doing is the secret to our success. And that means hiring people who are kids at heart, people who want to get out and there and play."

At Taos, whose offbeat Southwestern-Alpine culture is unlike that at most other ski resorts, the kids' lessons aren't as formulaic as they are for adults. So when hiring for the children's programs, they look for teachers with enthusiastic, enterprising, even goofy personalities, people with a knack for making lessons fun and interesting.

"We're a bit different from other places because Taos is a real town," says Blake. "Many of our employees live nearby; 130 of our staff have been here for 30 years."

The conclusion? Look for a kids program with small classes, an emphasis on getting to know the kids, instructors who like being with children, and a belief that the lessons are as much about discovering a remarkable outdoor sport as they are about learning specific skills. Good tips to remember, along with a few others listed below, ones I've learned over the years.

1. Don't try to teach your kids yourself. It's tough enough being a parent without playing the ski teacher, too. Let a professional instructor, a new friend and role model for your child, take on the challenge.
 2. Avoid planning a family ski vacation over a major holiday. Resorts fill up, the lift lines are long and restaurants are jammed. If holidays are your only free time, plan everything ahead in order to avoid the crowds.
 3. Reserve skis and snowboards in advance, by telephone or online, before you get there. It's easier to have the right equipment waiting for you than it is to search for the right boots and sizes when you arrive.
 4. Buy multi-day lift tickets online, in advance. The prices for kids and adults will be much lower than lift tickets bought at the ticket window.
 5. Teach your kids about on-mountain safety and courtesy. Don't ski or snowboard out of bounds or beyond the yellow tape that marks off-piste slopes. Don't speed in crowded areas near lifts, and slow down to avoid colliding and injuring other skiers.
 6. Rent a condominium on the snow. Carrying skis, poles and snowboards, helping kids get into pants and jackets each morning, coming back for items left behind: all the extra effort that goes into skiing with kids is easier if you're staying in a ski-in ski-out hotel or condominium located on the snow.
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