

# HIT THE SLOPES!



Photo: Darren Zeddy

Skiing as a family provides both thrills and bonding time.

by Donald Fraser

When John Leguard first started skiing with his family, he devised a mischievous way of spending extra time with his kids. He started packing M&Ms in his ski jacket.

“Unfortunately, ski lifts will only carry two or four people at a time,” he explains. “And we’re a five-person family. The first few times we skied together, the kids would all try to share a lift with their mother, Debra.”

Leguard gets a twinkle in his eye before continuing. “But it’s amazing what a secret stash of chocolate can do to boost your popularity as a parent.”

Chocolate, of course, is just a bonus. The real reason so many local families are hitting the slopes is the sheer joy of skiing. From the height of the hill, blue skies seem to stretch forever. There is the thrill of being buffeted by the speed-swept breeze as you learn to accelerate through the carving of turns. There is the challenge of mastering moguls and the night-before anticipation of trying out a run that you’ve never tried before.

Downhill skiing is addictive – in all the right

ways. And it is the perfect family activity.

“The amount of time you spend with your kids on the ski hill – talking, joking, just being together – is different than with other sports,” says Leguard.



Photo: Kathy Labranche

“On the lifts, in the chalet, in the car going to and from the hill, it all adds up.”

“When we’re going up the hill on the lift, I have a captive audience,” he jokes. “I mean, how often do you get to sit beside your children and have nothing to do but talk? It’s a great family bonding experience.”

For the Leguard family, skiing represents a full day of fun. “When the kids were younger, they’d spend some time in lessons,” he recalls. “Now we spend the bulk of the day together.”

The Leguards have been skiing together as a family for four years. While their older children, Sydney and Ainsley (15 and 13 respectively) could have started earlier, John and Debra wanted the entire family to be able to hit the slopes as one. They waited until their youngest, Chloe, turned 6.

But there is no set age for starting your kids on the slopes. Dan Stokes and his wife Alison introduced their children to skiing at the ages of 4 and 5. And, while it took a season for them to truly hit

their stride, Megan and Adam have become confident downhillers over the past three winters.

“When they’re that young, you start them out slow,” says Stokes. “You spend some time going back and forth to the chalet for warmth and rest. If they get wet or the weather is particularly cold, then the chalet is a necessity. Other times it is just a good precaution. When we first started, we’d ski for half an hour at a time, tops. We’d do six runs or so before having a hot chocolate break.”

For the most part, though, even young kids are fine for a day of skiing. “There were some half days at the beginning, when you could tell that tiredness was kicking in,” recalls Stokes. “But otherwise they were fine with both the cold and activity. As long as kids are moving and having fun, they’ll be good.”

Stokes’ kids just love the sport and all it offers, from speed to cool terrain to jumps and bumps. She’s only a kid, but Megan loves the jumps. I’m of the belief that children don’t naturally want to sit around the house. If they are given something really cool to do, they’re going to embrace it.” Even during the long, cold winter.

You’ll never see the sky a brighter blue than on a crisp winter day. You’ll never breathe air as fresh as that of winter in the country. And snow? There is nothing like making your own tracks through fresh powder down a hillside. It’s like you’re floating.

If the family time, fresh air, exercise, and adventure were not enough, there is also a wonderful sense of community to be found on ski hills.

“Everyone you meet is there for the same reason,” says Stokes. “It’s almost all families. There are kids the same age as your kids. The entire family ends up having ski hill friends.”

Having other children around when learning to ski has some great advantages. It gives kids – particularly younger kids – a peer group to learn with. This makes taking lessons a lot more comfortable. It also inspires confidence. “I remember Megan and Adam seeing kids their age doing great on the slopes and saying ‘hey, I can do that!’” says Stokes. “It helped them make the transition from beginner to skier and helped build excitement around the learning process.”



Both Leguard and Stokes recommend patient hands-on teaching from parents combined with professional lessons from ski hill staff. “We did lessons for three years,” says Leguard. “You choose either a Saturday or Sunday morning and attend regularly. It’s a pretty inexpensive way to go, the kids learn a lot, and then you have the

afternoon to ski as a family.”

The important part about introducing your kids to skiing, he says, is to not stress about it. “Kids are going to fall and you’re going to fall,” he says. “Don’t panic about what is going to happen. The kids will pick up that stress. Trust me, falling is going to hurt the kids a lot less than it is going to hurt you. They’re pretty indestructible on the ski hill. Go slow at first. Wear your helmets. Have fun.”

Stokes also suggests keeping things positive. “Celebrate the little things: a smooth, crash-free run, improved turns, improved technique. Cheer them on when they do something well. And make sure you stay engaged with them while they are trying new things. Give them attention and approval and support.”

And be sure to explore the many ski hills in our area to keep things interesting. Central Ontario is home to an impressive variety of alpine resorts (*see sidebar for a full list*). The Leguard family enjoys these local hot spots, and also takes their love of skiing on the road, spending vacation time together at resorts such as Smugglers Notch in Vermont and Mount Orford in the Eastern Townships of Quebec.

For the Stokes, ski vacations are still a couple of years away. “We look forward to it as a family. But for now, we’ll stick to local hills. You don’t need Whistler when you’re only 7 years old.”

Besides the excitement, downhill skiing provides lots of benefits to kids, says Stokes.

“I really believe that we’re setting the kids up for a lifelong activity, with so many transferable life skills,” he explains. “They are getting some active, social time – particularly now that they’ve started organized ski racing. They’re learning the importance and joy of incorporating healthy, outdoor fun into their lives on a regular basis.”

In addition, he says, “They’re developing core strength, coordination, and balance – traits that will help them in other activities. And they’re picking up a sport that they’ll do for a long, long time. Soon they’ll be heading to ski resorts with university buddies and continuing the adventures we started here.”

“Not only that,” adds Leguard. “But there is no television on the ski hill. And definitely no Facebook.”

Instead there are smiles, laughter, excitement, and fun. There are whoops of delight.

There are families finding the time to share their lives with each other.

And if you are particularly lucky, there are M&Ms.

*Donald Fraser is a freelance writer and outdoor enthusiast. He learned to ski in the mountains of Lake Louise, Alberta.*

## Skiing on a Budget

There are several ways to make skiing a more affordable family activity. The first is to be budget conscious when purchasing gear. The first few times you go skiing with your family, rent your skis, boots, and poles. There is no sense in dropping money on outfitting the family until you know whether or not skiing is for you. All ski hills will have rental options.

If you do take to this sport, look around for some used gear. Kids will outgrow their equipment rapidly and repeatedly. Most local ski hills have “Gear Swaps” before the snow flies. This is a great way to equip the family in a budget-conscious fashion. Missed the “Gear Swap?” Look online at sites such as Kijiji and check to see if your local ski hills have bulletin boards for trading/selling used equipment.

Once you start meeting people at the various hills, you’ll find a community that is very active in trading and “hand-me-down” sharing of skis and boots.

John Leguard takes advantage of trade ins at his local sports

outfitter. “We use the same sports store every year. As a result, we get great deals on trade-ins. After the initial investment of outfitting the family, it hasn’t cost us much at all each year following.”

Once your family is hooked on skiing, full-season family passes to your local ski hill are the way to go to save money. No question about it.

When first starting out, however, you will want to make sure your family is going to ski regularly before shelling out for a full year. Many hills will offer a reduced rate for “Half Day Passes.” Choosing to go for a few afternoon trips will let you know if the sport is right for you.

Finally, both Leguard and fellow skier, Dan Stokes, recommend another way to reduce your expenses – bring your own lunch. “You avoid line-ups and the food is healthier,” says Stokes.

The Leguards have their own ski hill tradition. “We have a tailgate BBQ,” he says. “You can cook up your own fun foods on a mini-BBQ. It’s a blast.”