



2.3 Teaching Children in the Active Start Stage of Development

In early childhood, the emphasis should be on play and discovery, with limited formal instruction. Programs for children in the Active Start stage of development should therefore be designed as “activity” plans, rather than “practice plans”, to meet the skill and ability levels of these youngest skiers.

2.3.1 How Children Learn

Children must attain a certain level of maturity to be teachable. That is why formal schooling begins in most countries when children are six or seven years old. For instance, the set ages for first graders is based on the average child’s ability to understand the information presented in school. They are old enough to be guided, or taught; they can understand what a teacher says and learn from it.

However children are developed enough to learn skiing and other physical literacy skills long before they have reached the stage of mental development necessary to handle school work. This may seem to be stating the obvious as everyone knows that children learn to walk, run, jump, swim, ride bikes and so on, long before they learn to count or read. But it’s only recently that it has been fully recognized how important the early stimulation of fundamental movement skills is.

Children have an enormous, spontaneous need to be active. They are naturally energetic, and play involving physical skills can use that energy meaningfully. Fundamental movement skills are a natural part of a child’s total development, and frequently the most obvious part. A child’s world is a physical world, one of constant, unbroken activity, eight hours or more a day. It is forced inactivity, not activity, that exhausts small children. They are literally “built” for the former, and incapable of handling the latter.

The challenge therefore is to fully exploit this high receptiveness to physical learning in children during a period when they are simply not teachable in the conventional sense of the word. In this situation the traditional roles of teacher and instructor are out of place. Instead, the most effective role for teaching is that of arranger or organizer. In other words, if you pick the place and set the scene, children can learn - sometimes without further intervention on your part.

2.3.2 Coaching Tips

Young children acquire ski skills quickly while playing on skis, and respond well to a positive, motivating environment in which to learn. They have their own special requirements, however, and there are some guidelines that coaches should follow to ensure that activities are appropriate!

Keep in mind that the objective is to teach cross-country skiing by creating situations in which children can learn basic skills naturally.

- ☐ Create situations in which children learn skiing naturally. Remember that children can learn to ski before they can comprehend they are learning.
- ☐ Use a ski playground. Choose a specific location where the group skis regularly, and develop





it to suit the needs of your group. Keep in mind that terrain will teach better than most people can.

- ☐ Ensure that the skiing environment is safe and well-suited to the ability of the skiers (i.e. safe; sheltered from the wind; varied terrain; set up for adventure, discovery and play; etc.)
- ☐ Encourage fun and playful activities. A fun and positive environment is conducive to excellent learning patterns.
- ☐ At this age children find comfort in following a routine. The group should have the same coaches for the duration of the program.
- ☐ Coaches are advised to keep records of games and activities that they find useful, both for their own use and for sharing with new leaders in the program.
- ☐ Balance is vital, and rhythm is more important than technical finesse. Make sure that the location and design of your sessions provides for optimal opportunities for the development of good balance and rhythm.
- ☐ Sessions should be short. 30 to 60 minutes for the actual session (depending on the age of the child) is ideal, with additional supervised play time. Take into consideration snow and weather conditions. It is better to be short and enjoyable than long and discouraging.
- ☐ Use “role models” frequently. Role models can be the club head coach, junior racing team or senior racing team athletes from your club, or a “hot shot” skier that is 10 or 12 years old.
- ☐ Six to eight formal “activity sessions” a winter are appropriate. Keep the structured ski season short. However, children should be encouraged to spend time on skis in addition to their activity sessions - as many ski playground experiences as possible - and to go on age-appropriate ski excursions with their family in late winter and early spring. Special ski experiences with the family are very important.
- ☐ Comparisons with other children should be avoided. Coaches should not “measure” achievement, but rather should reward enthusiasm, fun, effort and respect for others.
- ☐ Always take into consideration the weather conditions. Establish cancellation policies that consider the facilities available at the ski area (or lack of), and are appropriate for this age group. Be flexible.
- ☐ Ensure parents are educated as to the clothing standards for the program and that children are not dropped off for their activity session unprepared.
- ☐ Create a nurturing and comfortable environment during the first five minutes of every session. It is much easier to work with children who are comfortable being with the group.
- ☐ It is important for the coaches to have good contact with children when they are on skis on the snow.
- ☐ Instruction with this age group is best accomplished one on one. However, play can be encouraged as a group process.





- ☐ Continually encourage the skiers.
- ☐ Ensure that structured instruction time is minimal; keep all instructions brief and simple.
- ☐ Use musical beat to help develop rhythm. For example, chant children's rhymes that have a suitable beat. The underlying rhythms of skiing maneuvers are more important than technical perfection.
- ☐ Use positive statements (e.g. "look in front all the time..." instead of "don't look behind...").
- ☐ Encourage cooperation with others and proper skiing etiquette.
- ☐ Children can understand the difference between black and white, red and green, Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse before they learn the difference between left and right. You may choose to put stickers on skis or ribbons on legs to help them with directional instructions.
- ☐ At this age children appreciate consistency. Relate instructions to things they have done before. They relate well to the same coaches and the same games.

2.3.3 Balance

The main goal of learning to ski at an early age is to promote balance – the ability to stand steadily on something in motion. For ordinary everyday situations children develop and their bodies automate the positional reflexes that counteract the pull of gravity on the various parts of the body. Skiing involves forces and movements that lie outside the sphere of this automated balance process.

Balance is largely controlled by sensory nerves in the soles of the feet. These sensors react to changes in pressure, and evoke reflexive muscular movements. In beginners, these reflexive movements may be extreme, as "fine tuning" the smaller, deft movements in response to a stimulus are the result of experience.

Maintaining balance while gliding at constant speed on an even underlying snow layer is only marginally more difficult than retaining balance while standing still. Apprehension and fear of speed, however, can disturb the process and upset balance, causing falls.

Skiing involves speed, which is one of the attributes contributing to the thrill of the sport. Terrain slopes and snow surfaces vary. Speed increases and decreases continuously, and sometimes skiers become airborne and then land. The fine reflexes involved in balance must be trained to handle these situations. Balance is the very core of the ability to ski.

Balance isn't a maneuver which can be learned by being instructed or by copying others, as can, say, the various turns used in downhill skiing.

Balance is the product of extensive and varied experience on skis, an underlying fact which should be emphasized in all instructive situations. This also means that using one specific style in skiing maneuvers isn't at all necessary, or even desirable. What is important is the unconscious automating of the sensory detection-automatic reflex cycle.





2.3.4 Rhythm

Basic rhythm skills are developed during the early years of life and, if developed well, open up later possibilities for lifelong involvement in dance, music and other artistic activities. Rhythm activities also help develop fluid movement patterns that can help children perform many fundamental movement and fundamental sport skills with greater ease and efficiency.

Rhythm is as vital in skiing as it is in music. Without it, much is lost. Skiers, like musicians, can get off beat and ruin their performances. This doesn't mean that children must have musical talent to ski well, but it does mean that the underlying rhythms of skiing maneuvers are more important than the technical perfection of their components. This is where many coaches err. "The knee should be here, not there; weight on this ski, not that one," and so on. Details like these are not critical in the early stages of athlete development. A child with good rhythm will pick up any needed fine points, but a child lacking rhythm in a maneuver still has much to learn, no matter how perfectly individual movements may be performed.

Just as in music, the essence of rhythm in skiing is to depart from regularity to avoid the monotony of repetition. Rhythm in skiing means that the right things happen at the right times. Exploiting the connection between the rhythm of a movement and the tonal image of a musical equivalent is a superb teaching aid. The syllables or words used may direct or command, as in many children's ditties. But their rhythmic content is more important. Single syllables, such as short words or even the tones of the diatonic scale can be chanted or sung. They don't even have to have any meaning. Words ending in vowels are particularly useful, as the vowel can be cut off or stretched out to suit the duration of the movement involved. Chanting "DO-DO!", "I SKIIII!" or similar combinations of words creates clear audible images that do more to imbue rhythmic movement than any explanation of details.



TEACHING CHILDREN TO SKI

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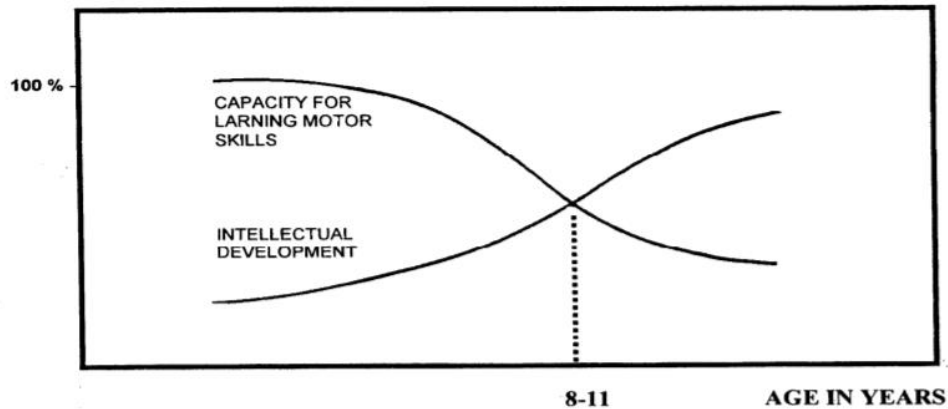


Figure 2.1

The capacity for learning motor skills is high at birth and diminishes thereafter. Up to age four or five, motor skills develop characteristically as basic and gross movements, which are the foundations of future proficiencies. Ages four through 12 are especially important for learning new movement patterns and techniques. Proficiencies gained in this period are readily automated and well retained. Intellectual development makes children most receptive to schools when they are eight through 11 years old.