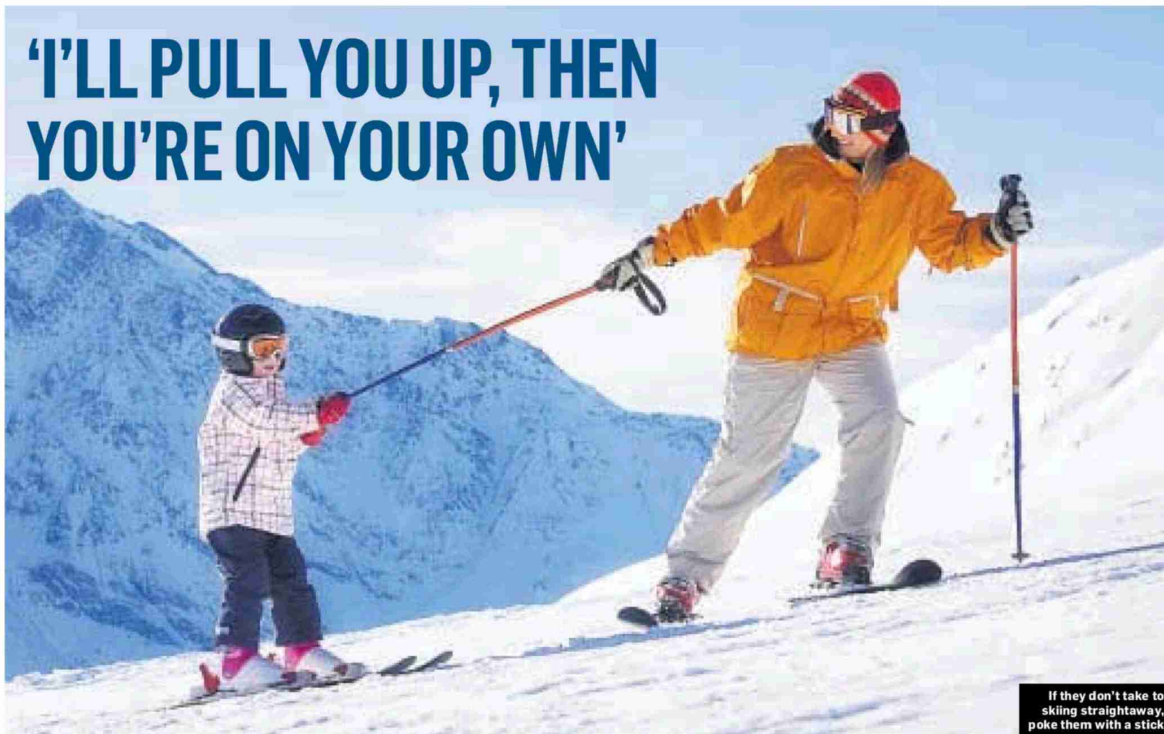


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If they don't take to skiing straightaway, poke them with a stick

Adie Bush/Corbis

What's the right age to take your children on their first ski trip – and not put them off snow for life? Sean Newsom investigates

When should children start to ski? "That's a question I get asked all the time," says Erick Guironnet, of Magic in Motion, an Anglo-French ski school founded in Méribel in 1992. "There's no straightforward answer – it all depends on what the child is like. How do they react when they're left alone without their parents? Are they physically dynamic or not? How do they respond to a new challenge? Ultimately, a parent knows the answers to these questions best."

Guironnet's school has taught thousands of children, "95% of them British", so he knows a thing or two about the issue. And he has no doubts

about the good that skiing can do. "I think children who ski are less 'stupid' physically. More confident, too. But the main benefit is the chance to taste the sense of freedom and adventure that skiing can bring. These days, there aren't many ways a child can get that."

So, when to go? To make that choice a little easier, we've selected three key age categories to consider. Now all you have to do is take a long, hard look at your brood, shut your ears to all the talk of what's "normal" and decide what's right for them.

✚ *Unless stated, flights are from London. Ask the tour operator about regional departure options*

UNDER FOUR

If you want your son or daughter to be a ski racer, then get them on skis as soon as possible: about 18 months to two years old is normal in the Alps. The rest of us shouldn't even think about it until they're three.

Even then, you've got to prepare for the possibility that they will hate it. That's not because of the skiing: the real problem is that many ski schools don't want parents hanging around on the nursery slopes. For many children under four, however, being left with a bunch of strangers on their first morning in the mountains can be an overwhelming experience.

Fortunately, not everyone thinks the



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same way. "The key to success at this age is for the parents to be involved," says Gerhard Told, of the Skischule Scheffau, in Austria. He is regarded as a children's skiing guru in the SkiWelt, Austria's largest interconnected ski area, and has designed an introduction to skiing for the under-fours. It lasts only 45 minutes and makes use of skis called Mini-Carvers, which can be worn without ski boots, so little feet don't have to cope with hard plastic.

Parents are expected to offer encouragement and support. "Usually, after just one or two sessions the children are skiing a little," Told says. "As soon as they can do that, they're fine — it's the standing around beforehand that's the problem."

He claims an 80% success rate, with children progressing quickly to normal classes, without mum or dad.

To try the Told method, stay at the Hotel Alpin, in Scheffau, which has a pool and is a short bus ride from the slopes. Crystal (0871 231 2256, crystalski.co.uk) has a half-term week for a family of four, arriving on February 16, for £4,226, half-board, including flights, transfers and drinks for the adults. Skischule Scheffau (00 43 5358 8308) offers Mini-Carver introduction to skiing sessions for £20 each.

FOUR TO SIX

Many instructors and family ski specialists suggest this as a good age range for a child's first proper ski lesson. "Once they've gone to school, they are better able to understand instructions and are physically more able," says Lisa Dance, of the Family Ski Company. "Just don't assume that they'll take to it automatically — my daughter was able to ride a horse at a rising trot when she was four and a half, but it was another year before she started to enjoy skiing."

To help younger children settle into ski school, Dance's company sends a member of staff with its four- and five-year-old skiers — to check on their progress and cheer them along when they have their breakthroughs. It also offers English-speaking childcare in the afternoons — six days of ski school and childcare cost £299 per child aged 4-6. The pretty village of

Ardent — part of the enormous Franco-Swiss Portes du Soleil ski area — is the best of its destinations for families with younger children. A week for a family of four, arriving on February 9 and staying in a chalet in the resort, starts at £4,382, half-board, including transfers, but not flights, with Family Ski (01684 540333, familyski.co.uk). Airlines flying to Geneva include EasyJet (0843 104 5000, easyjet.com) and British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com).

Several other tour operators go the extra mile to help make those early days on the slopes a success. Esprit (01483 791900, espritski.com) and Powder Byrne (020 8246 5300, powderbyrne.com) offer exclusive ski-school classes for the children of guests — so there's no chance of them being stuck in a bilingual group. They guarantee small classes, too — a maximum size of seven with Powder Byrne and eight with Esprit. Esprit has a week for a family of four at Le Braconnier, a ski-in, ski-out chalet in La Rosière, France, arriving on February 17, for £4,181, half-board, including flights and transfers. The ski school costs £199 per child for five two-hour lessons.

SEVEN TO TWELVE

These are the golden ages of the family ski holiday. The children are more confident, but not yet embarrassed to

be with their parents. They're still learning quickly, too. According to Guironnet, up to nine is best, "because they don't think too much about what they're doing".

At this age, booking with a family ski specialist such as Mark Warner (0844 273 1548, markwarner.co.uk) is definitely worth considering. But you can get them off to a flying start by booking them into a ski school that specialises in teaching Brits — such as New Generation (0844 770 4733, skinewgen.com) — then looking for your own child-orientated accommodation.

Self-catering apartments are the cheapest option, and work well if parents already know how ski resorts work, and don't need the support of a tour operator's staff. For example, Pierre & Vacances (0870 026 7145, pv-holidays.com) has a week in a

one-bedroom flat sleeping four in the Residence Le Christiania, in La Tania, France, arriving on February 16, for £1,725, excluding travel. Return Channel crossings start at £110 for a car and passengers with Eurotunnel (0844 335 3535, eurotunnel.com). Magic in Motion (00 33 4 79 01 07 85, www.magicinmotion.co.uk) has five three-hour group lessons for children from £144.

Or how about America? Older children will take the long-haul flight in their stride, and they will love the ego-boosting atmosphere. Keystone, in Colorado, prides itself on its family-friendly facilities. Ski Safari (01273 224060, skisafari.com) has a week for a family of four, arriving on February 9, for £4,530, self-catering, including flights and transfers. One six-hour group ski lesson for children costs £96.

**"Eighteen months
or two years old
is a normal age
to start skiing in
the Alps"**