

The Right Stuff for Mighty-Mites

One of the most commonly asked questions each season is “what equipment do you recommend for our Mighty-Mite skier?” Kids grow fast, and can’t get away with several seasons from a pair of skis or boots, like adults do. And we all know what it can do to the budget. Often we take advantage of ski swaps and hand-me-downs, while the oldest kid seems to always get the new stuff. When my two brothers and I learned how to ski, my parents could not afford to buy lift tickets and rentals for all three of us. So my oldest brother rented boots that were the tightest fit he could handle. He’d ski an hour until his feet hurt, then go into the lodge and pass all the gear (and lift ticket!) on to the next brother, who fit well, then later on to me, with huge boots and jacket sleeves that reached the ground. We were just glad to be able to ski. If cost is a concern, I strongly encourage used gear and hand-me-downs, as long as you can avoid the common pitfalls that will often frustrate kids, coaches and parents by mid season -- primarily improper fitting.

Skis: It is always a challenge for me to keep up with the many brands and models available every year, so I avoid recommending one model of ski over another. The mini season focuses more on becoming great all around skiers while introducing them to racing. This, along with their age, means there is no need for technical racing skis – they’re just not that serious about it yet. My suggestion is a good all-mountain ski made for kids, with a slalom type of side-cut and fairly easy flexing. Today's kid skis are well designed and will help facilitate getting them into carved turns. Keeping them well waxed and the occasional tune-up is important. If buying used, be sure to avoid older model skis which are too stiff with not enough side-cut, and always have a certified technician check the bindings for proper release function and settings.

Boots: The two biggest problems I see in boots are (1) an improper fit, and (2) restricting their leg movements. Often parents try to "squeeze in one more season" even though they sprouted like a weed since Thanksgiving, or big brother's boots have been handed down, with a second pair of socks to help them fit, like I experienced as a kid. Or, their feet grew faster than the rest of them, so the only boot that fits their foot is a junior racing boot that goes clear to the knee and inhibits proper stance. It's hard enough to get kids to bend their knees and ankles forward, and a stiff boot usually means they will try to bend the knee forward, stop when the boot quits flexing, then naturally drop back to an improper "sitting" position. If you're buying new, get something fairly soft and easy flexing. Hand-me-downs are fine, as long as they fit. Too large of a boot means blisters, socks slipping down, and the foot has extra movement inside the boot. Too small can restrict blood circulation and cause cold feet and cramping.

Clothing: This can actually be more critical to a good day on the slopes than the skis themselves. If you are too cold, too wet or too hot, you're not having fun. Would your kids be any different? Layering helps, so that layers can be removed if they get too warm (provided there is a place to put them). A neck gaiter keeps snow out of the collar and gives the chin and nose something to hide behind on windy days. Be sure that pants fasten tightly over the boots to prevent snow from getting in. Mittens are warmer than gloves, but be sure they can grip their poles. It's a great idea to run a cord so that the gloves or mitts are connected to each other through the jacket sleeves. This keeps them from getting lost or dropped from the lift, which keeps kids, coaches and parents happy. Protect them from the elements. It's as simple as that (which also brings me to the next topic).

Helmets: Again, proper fit is a must. I've seen kids going extremely fast down the mountain, hit a bump, and have their helmet slide forward over their eyes while the goggles end up positioned snugly over their chin. Temperature control can also be an issue. Adjustable vents on the helmet are helpful. Most of a person's body heat escapes from their head, so a helmet without vents can be too warm on sunny days or while hiking the backcountry, while some helmets with a more "open" design do not provide enough warmth on cold days. Furthermore, the mighty-mite programs require helmets during all participation, so why not have the kids ski with them all the time?

Goggles and sunglasses: The reflection of the sun on snow, even on cloudy days, causes severe damage to the eyes in a short amount of time (known as snow blindness). Often kids don't like to wear goggles, but in my group it's not an option. I've seen too many young skiers in the patrol room because they were "seeing spots", a result of poor eye protection. This can cause permanent damage. Again, protect from the elements.

Finally, get the advice of your local ski shop. Be sure to tell them your child will be participating in a mighty-mite program, but be careful not to get the up-sell to racing equipment before they're ready for it. Ski shop employees will help with proper ski sizing and boot fit, and are up-to-date on all of the latest gear available.

As parents, you've made a substantial investment in season passes and a top-notch training program. To make the most of it, you might need to spend a little bit more on proper equipment and clothing. Even if costs are not a concern, you do not necessarily need to get "the best". They out grow their equipment quickly, so save the budget for when they become top junior athletes requiring 2-3 pair of skis each season! The pay-off will come when you see them standing on the podium with a big grin and a medal around their neck.