



5 Keys For Parents To Promote Superior Performance By Their Children on Race Day

By Jon Nolting, USSA Sport Education Director

As parents we invest a lot in our children's participation in skiing and snowboarding. We commit a substantial amount of energy, time, and money to their pursuit, and as a result, it is natural to be vested emotionally in our child's performance at competition. We want our kids to do well on many different levels. But for all the sacrifices we make, are we doing the right things leading up to and on the competition day to allow our children to perform at their best? Here are five key tips for ski and snowboard parents.

- 1. Be prepared and plan ahead.** For most parents, this will involve helping your child be prepared as well as yourselves. However, you'll want to progressively put more of the preparation and planning responsibility on your child. Preparation is much more than the logistics of getting everything booked and ready to go. Preparation speaks to the training your kids receive leading up to the event. Preparation includes school, helping your child to work with their teachers if school will be missed for events, and making sure your child completes their schoolwork before the event so their mind can be clear for racing. Preparation involves eating right before and during competition, and as a parent making sure that pre-race meals are healthy, high in energy boosting carbohydrates, and that your child is well hydrated. Preparation involves getting equipment ready. If you are a parent who takes care of the waxing and tuning of your child's skis, it is very important that you start to pass this responsibility on to your child as soon as they are ready (they should start waxing by age ten). While you may enjoy it, you may do a better job at it than your child will do initially, and it certainly helps your child with all of their other time demands, you could be sending two dangerous messages. First, you send the message that your child is not good enough to take care of their equipment. What happens when they travel on their first team or divisional project and you can't be there? Second, you send the message that having the fastest skis is one of the most important things to worry about for a race, and consequently there is a high tendency to blame a poor result on the skis. For cross-country events the right wax makes a big difference, but for most other junior ski and snowboard competitors this factor is relatively small compared with other variables the athlete should focus on. Long story short, as parents we want to help teach and model good preparation habits to our children, and make sure they take ownership when they are ready.
- 2. Make competition day routine.** A sure fire way to set your child up for inconsistent performance is to make competition day look much different from any other training day. Is the only time they see you out on the hill when there is a race? Do you only come to watch the big races? Will the grandparents and aunts and uncles all come out for the big event? All of these variables can be a distraction for the athletes. That doesn't mean that everyone shouldn't come out for the races, quite the opposite, but it does mean as a parent to keep an eye on your child's needs when managing the rest of the family. Things like sleep and nutrition before the race shouldn't be compromised, and during the race make sure you give your



child the space they normally require to get themselves ready. The more routine race day is for your child, the more relaxed they will be and the more they can focus on performing well.

3. **Focus on the right things.** If you want the very best results for your child, don't focus on their results. Don't bring it up before the competition. Not even once. Most young athletes' tendency is to over emphasize results as it is. Not until they are around 12-13 years old do they usually start to associate

● ● ●
"If you want the very
best results for your
child, don't focus on
their results."
● ● ●

that their efforts can lead to improved results. Until then they generally believe that ability only leads to good results, and that ability is a fixed trait, either you have it or you don't. Most children are shocked to learn that Ted Ligety and Bode Miller didn't sniff a Junior Olympic podium until they were seventeen. Their assumption is that top athletes like these were winning since they strapped on skis. Even Michael Jordan was cut from the varsity team in high school, and couldn't play for the college he wanted to because he wasn't good enough. It is important as a parent to give your kids the message that they can succeed in whatever they put their mind to.

Skiing and snowboarding are no exception. So on race day, focus on their effort and preparation, as well as sportsmanship and discipline. When parents talk too much about results, selections, and team naming, they are reinforcing an ability-centric message. Of course we want our kids to do well, but we need to help them focus on the things they have control over, which will help them do well in the long run.

4. **Inspect your competition day actions.** Do your actions tend to elevate the pressure your child feels on competition day, or are your signals re-affirming? Your child's coach should be preaching a "train like you race, race like you train" philosophy to help your child train with intensity and approach competition day with confidence. For many young athletes, it takes years of practice to learn how to deal with the pressure of competition and to perform consistently at their peak. The worst thing we can do as a parent is to add to that pressure. So ask yourself, do I get very emotionally charged up on competition day for my child? It is OK if you do, but don't let it impact how you act around your child. And if it is too difficult to manage, pull yourself away. Many parents choose to volunteer at their children's races specifically to distract them from these feelings. Other helpful strategies on competition day are to cheer for all the competitors during the event (it can be distracting for you and models good sportsmanship) or to go skiing or riding with a group before and after race runs to enjoy the different mountains and pull yourself away (many resorts offer discounted lift tickets to parents on competition day). You want to be ready to support your child as they need you.
5. **Have fun.** If you're relaxed and having fun on competition day, your child is much more likely to enjoy themselves as well. OK, there are days where it is snowing and blowing or raining and dreary when you wish you were watching your child play tennis in Florida instead. But if you still go out and cheer and enjoy yourself on these days, your kids will learn an important lesson in perseverance. The number one reason kids participate in sports is to have fun. Fun can be made up of a lot of things, thrill of the sport, time with friends, enjoyment of the outdoors, and performing well are primary fun aspects of skiing and snowboarding. Making sure your kids can experience those aspects of the sport they find fun on a regular basis is one of your most important roles as a parent. In the end, why do we do it? For that smile hidden beneath their neck gator, I hope!