TEACHING SNOW SPORTS TO YOUNG CHILDREN; THE OPPORTUNITIES AND PROBLEMS

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Introduction

When considering Adventure education it is difficult to imagine children as young as four years old to participate, but since undertaking my placement year I have observed how quick and efficient children are at adapting to new skills and concepts.

During my placement year I worked as a Snow Ranger in a popular ski resort with my main duties assisting a Ski Instructor with the beginner skiers. The majority of the children were aged between five and seven years old with no or little experience on snow and by the end their instruction week, were competent to descend a blue slope.

When discussing the opportunities and problems of introducing children aged from five to seven into snow sports; their developmental stage, the instruction process and risks of injury will be addressed with reference to my placement.

Literature reviews

Skiing has developed into a popular sport which is enjoyed by people of all ages and abilities with children being as young as three years of age. But are children this young ready to be on the piste, have they the motor skills to successfully and safely participate.

Gallahue and Ozmink (1995) state that children aged between 5 and 7 years are in the mature and elementary stage of the fundamental movement phase. Children learn to perform a variety of stabilizing, loco-motor and manipulative movements. Although the skill of skiing is new, most children of this age should have developed several movement patterns such as skipping. This ability to maintain balance and control, implying development in their neuromuscular and dynamic balance, which will assist in learning the fundamental skills of skiing. The majority of children younger do not have the sufficient motor skills required for skiing.

Studies such as Barack, Bloom and Falcao (2012) have proven introducing fundamental movement skills during the optimal physical development stage promote athletic excellence. This would be the reasoning behind witnessing most of the children competently ski a run by the end of the instruction week, as physical activity is associated with improved motor development (Banack et al, 2012). It is believed that acquiring fundamental movement skills at a young age will help children develop lifelong participation in physical activity (Banack et al, 2012).

Although at the optimal of developing fundamental skills, there are many studies which show children and beginners have an increased risk of injury whilst participating in snow sports due to many reasons. Meyers, Laurent, Higgins and Skelly (2007) state that the highest percentage of injury occurs from ages 6-15 years compounded by inexperience, musculoskeletal immaturity, and inadequate equipment design, adjustment and function. Sulhine, Holme, Rodven, Ekeland and Bahr (2011) results show that, beginners were at a higher risk of injuries compared to the intermediate, good and expert but state that children up to 12 years of age are less likely to injury compared with adolescents (13-20years). Langran and Selvaraj (2002) state that alpine skiers under 16 years of age are more likely to get injured. Throughout the studies the age ranges differ between children and adolescents resulting in it being difficult to distinguish a definite increase in injury for children aged between 5 and 7.

Since skill level is the primary impetus in minimizing ski injuries, formal instruction focusing on strategies such as collision avoidance and helmet use fail training minimizing lower extremity trauma, altering ski technique and avoiding behaviors that lead to excessive risk are, therefore, highly recommended (Meyers et al, 2007). Many studies have been completed to determine a reduced risk in injury dependent on the form of instruction and Koehle, Lloyd-Smith and Taunton (2002) states that there is no evidence to demonstrate that traditional ski instruction reduces injury but Banack et al (2012) contradict stating that skiing instruction decreased the risk of potentially severe injuries. Although formal instruction does not reduce risk, it does provide experience and practice for the child which Langran and Selvaraj (2002) states that more than six days experience on the slope may decrease the risk of injury.

Discussion

During my work placement the youngest child accepted into the beginner group was five years old, with the majority of the children aged between five and seven years old. Children between this age range have been shown to be in the elementary and mature stage of the fundamental phase of development and the ski school adapts their instruction around it to benefit the child’s motor skills. Every ski instructor who facilitated the beginner children during instruction followed the same procedures designed to introduce the new motor skill of skiing stage by stage, which was known as the Central Theme. The central theme learning process is a gradual, evolving procedure, thought of as a continuum (BASI Alpine Manuals, 2012).

Assisting every ski session for five months, the methods in which the instructors followed were efficient in teaching the fundamental skills of skiing to the children allowing them to gain experience and develop the fundamentals behind skiing.

Although many studies show that children are more prone to injuries, with Meyers et al, (2007) stating studies show there are trends in trauma in the very young and inexperienced with minimal motor skills, Meyers et al, (2007) also state that is also possible that there is a bias towards reporting injuries among children, thereby contributing to a perceived increase in injury incidence compared with older populations. This may be due to children causing more of a controversial issue due to all of the discussions in this paper rather than adults resulting in a bias on age.

Instructors avoided putting children who were below their desired developmental stage in an inadequate ski group. Some instructors mentioned that particular children could not understand the mechanics of skis therefore were moved to the lower group. Every child was placed in their ski group relevant to their developmental stage and motor skill ability, not necessarily their age.

But due to studies proving that skiing instruction is not an influential factor of increased risk of injury, ski instruction does provide children to learn proper physical conditioning, speed control, body position, balance and coordination, and also provides an opportunity to acquire proper safety habits, responsibility and courtesy toward others on the slopes (Meyers et al, 2007). All instructors followed the FIS rules for instructors (BASI Alpine Manual, 2011) which are aimed to teach pupils how to safely participate involving the technique of skiing and the rules of conduct for skiers. This is a compulsory measure within the ski school, as it was to wear a helmet and sun lotion during the instructed sessions. The children developed throughout the week not only in their skiing but in their personal development; becoming more independent by carrying their own skis and instinctively helping each other up when falling.

All of these factors were a mandatory part of the teaching process for instructors but if a child was being taught by an external source such as a parent, they may not always provide this knowledge awareness.

Conclusion

Although many studies state that children are at an increased risk of injury due to lack of motor demands for skiing, formal instruction provides methods in which to develop fundamental movement skills efficiently, ensuring the child is fully prepared and confident when skiing on the piste for the first time. Although ski instruction does not always mean a reduced risk of injury it does provide knowledge and safety skills to abide to on the slopes. Children aged between 5 - 7 years are at the optimal time in their developmental stage to learn the fundamental skills and transfer them with practicing with their peers and parents.

Every beginner session witnessed during the placement, every ESF Instructor introduced safety and injury prevention into the instruction whether it was ensuring they all stopped on the plate underneath the leading person or allowing them to choose the safest spot to stop for lunch. For these reasons, children should be encouraged to attend a ski school for a minimum of 1 year to potentially improve their skiing ability from a beginner to an intermediate level (Meyers et al, 2007).

To conclude, Meyers et al (2007) states that all high-risk sports, the answer may lie in increased wisdom and responsibility of both the skier and the parent to ensure an adequate level of ability, self control and simply common sense as they venture out on the slopes.

References


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