

Opinion: Ski resorts not doing enough to protect children

By Dick Penniman

For some people, the idea of “safe skiing” is an oxymoron. Isn’t skiing all about pitting your wits and skill against the raw mountain wilderness? Certainly that was true when skiing was first invented. And, it’s still the case for the backcountry, but not at today’s mountain resorts.



Modern mountain resorts are doing everything they can to make themselves into “family resorts;” theme parks where mom

and dad can bring the kids and everybody has fun. But resort operators are not telling you about the real dangers, including those that can be easily fixed but aren’t.

Less than 50 percent of the chairlifts in California have safety bars.

Tragically, in December, a young boy was killed when he fell 60 feet from a chairlift at Sugar Bowl near Lake Tahoe. It is difficult to imagine how such a thing happened at a “family resort.” But looking realistically, one can see that chairlifts are little more than park benches hung from a cable that bounce across steel towers high above the ground at 1,500 feet per minute.

Most of us wouldn’t deliberately put our child alone or with other kids on a park bench built for adults with no restraints whatsoever, and then allow a forklift to hoist it 60 feet in the air to cruise down the street at 1,500 feet per minute. But this is essentially what is allowed at most mountain

resorts in California every single day.

As trusting parents, we often put our precious, young children in the hands of the mountain resort ski school assuming the “professionals” will watch out for them and not allow them to ride on the chairlift without an adult. But, this is exactly what can and often does happen because the resorts have no specific mandate to do otherwise. Even the most disciplined child has a hard time sitting still for more than a couple minutes. It’s not a question of “if” a catastrophe will happen; sadly, it’s a question of “when”.

Tips for parents

Given mountain resorts’ approach to chairlift safety, parents must:

- Ensure the resort has chairlifts with restraint bars and a mandatory policy to lower the bars.
- Ask the resort to see its child chairlift safety policy.
- Learn and teach your child how to ride the chair safely. Make sure they know never to ride up without an adult.
- If you put your child in ski school, inform the instructor about your child’s abilities and challenges, including behavior and special needs. And make sure their policy is to always have an adult ride the chair with the child.
- Make sure your child is properly dressed for the weather and wears his or her helmet properly and at all times.
- Visit SnowSport Safety Foundation for an assessment of safety practices at the resort you intend to visit.

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