

The Freedom to Quit

Sam started skiing this year. At four, he was eager to join his older siblings on the ski hill. I am (or rather was pre-kids) an OK skier, but I do not feel at all capable of helping a fledgling skier learn. So, I connected Sam with a couple of lessons on the bunny slope.

He loved his first instructor and the one-hour lesson went great. I was at the foot of the slope the whole time, and he knew he could stop at any time if he wanted to.

A couple of weeks later, Sam took a second lesson with a different instructor and it didn't go well. Maybe it was the instructor, maybe he just wasn't in the skiing zone that day, maybe he was cold, or hungry, or tired. Maybe it was all of the above.

Again, I was at the foot of the bunny slope during his lesson, and again Sam knew that he could quit at any time. The instructor was a bit taken aback by this. She said that sometimes kids see mom and start crying even though they were fine before seeing mom. As though Mom is the problem.

I don't buy it. I see these kids—some of them younger than Sam—on the mountain, often crying for their moms or whimpering as they muddle through their lesson. That's not how we approach childrearing. Skiing is supposed to be fun; it's not a chore. Certainly not for a four-year-old. If a kid is crying or wants his mom or just wants to be done with skiing, let him be done. Why push a kid who can't even wipe his own bum to man up? What's the point?

During his second lesson, Sam knew I was at the bottom of the slope. I could tell he wasn't really into it. As he and the instructor got closer, preparing to head up the lift again, I overheard him say something to her. I couldn't quite make out what he said, but I heard her reply, "Oh no, you can't stop. We have to keep skiing." At that, I went over and asked Sam how it was going. He whispered to me that he wanted to stop but the instructor had said no. I asked if he wanted to do just one more run with the instructor, and he said no, that he was done. I listened, and politely told the teacher that Sam was ready for the lesson to be over. I could tell she was a bit annoyed. The lesson was only half done and we had paid in full—but that's my loss, not hers. She got paid. She could go into the lodge and have a cup of soup on me.

The freedom to quit is an essential aspect of an unschooling lifestyle. Frankly, I think a four-year-old should be able to quit anything, whether he's unschooled or not. That's about gentle parenting, not any education philosophy. But for unschooling, the freedom to quit—as long as that freedom does not negatively impact someone else—is a vital part of Self-Directed Education. We should connect our children to resources in their wider world,

expose them to new and different opportunities, and be very clear about participation policies when signing up for things so we have the freedom to quit.

If quitting causes an instructor or organization to lose money she had relied on or prevents a class from running that impacts others, then we should be extra sure that we are willing to commit to an entire program—whether we like it or not. We should think long and hard about whether or not a class we can't quit is worth the chance. Most of the time, quitting a class does not cause hardship to others—just to our own pocketbook—and should be a viable option. I have registered for adult education classes in the past, found a couple of them to be *meh*, and quit the classes because it wasn't worth my time. I lost my money but I regained my time, and I learned to be more discerning of instructors and courses the next time I registered for something.

Granting children the same ability to quit that we adults enjoy is not about giving in or being soft; it's about respect and fair treatment. I don't want to be coerced into doing something against my will and I don't want my child to be coerced either—particularly something that is supposed to be for enjoyment. Going to the dentist is one thing; a beginner ski lesson is another.

Maybe Sam will want to ski again, or maybe not. Maybe it won't be his thing, or maybe it will. We'll follow his lead—and listen when he says stop.

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