

Gear up for Safety

Choosing the right life jackets for your kids.

Water safety should be every parent's primary concern around the water. Balancing your kid's desire for fun with your need for safety can be a tricky goal to achieve.

Ever since our kids were babies on our boat, we instilled in them the rules of wearing a life jacket: Always on the dock and while underway.

There's no debate about it — life jackets are necessary for kids. As the U.S. Coast Guard states: "When a vessel is underway with children under 13 years old, they must be wearing a life jacket unless they are below deck or in an enclosed cabin."

Boaters also need to follow their state's boating safety requirements. State guidelines may include children's life jacket rules for specific ages, boat sizes or boating operations.

The start of each new boating season is the best time to assess whether you have the right life jacket for your kids. Before boating season is underway — before your kids even step foot on the dock — review whether your life jackets fit properly or are in need of an upgrade.

Life jacket types and sizes

When it comes to life jackets, size matters. You need to be sure you are choosing the right life jacket for the weight of children on-board your boat.

According to the U.S. Coast Guard, a child's life jacket must fit snugly and not allow the child's chin or ears to slip through. Proper fit and buoyancy (based on weight) is essential.

You'll want to follow this general overview of appropriate life jacket choices by age and weight:

Infants and babies: Life jackets for babies and infants should be labeled as an Infant PFD under 30 pounds (be sure to pick the right size based on your baby's weight), Coast Guard approved and Type II. Other mandatory features include a "heads-up" flotation pad and a strap that goes between the legs.

Toddlers (18 months to 3 years): A toddler life jacket needs some extra safety features, such as a grab handle and a strap between the legs. Toddlers less than 30 pounds should use an infant life jacket with a heads-up cushion. Toddler life jackets are usually labeled for kids 30-50 pounds, listed as Coast Guard approved, and Type II or Type III, but you may choose one less than 30 pounds if you have a smaller toddler.

Youth (3 years and up): Youth life jackets are usually labeled for kids 30-50 pounds or 50-90 pounds, depending on the weight of your child. They should be listed as Coast Guard Approved, and Type II or Type III. The heads-up cushion is usually no longer included in larger youth jackets, but there may still be a leg strap for the 30-50 pound vests.

Older kids: Kids that are in their "twens" or teens are sometimes not interested in wearing a life jacket, but even



adults need to wear life jackets on smaller boats, sailboats or for watersports. Select a life jacket by weight, such as a 50-90 pound jacket, or a smaller adult size with a snug fit.

Updating life jacket gear

An annual review of life jackets is good practice to determine if your child has outgrown last year's size and are in need of a replacement.

First, check to see if your youth life jackets are still fitting properly. It may be time for them to move up into the next size bracket — like stepping up from the under 30 pound category to the 30-50 pound size range.

It's also smart to check life jackets for wear and tear and ensure they are in shipshape for the season. As kids get older, they move up in size less often and their jackets tend to get worn out faster. If you are handing down an older sibling's life jacket, verify that the life jacket is still in good shape for the next child's use. Check for worn-out buckles and straps or loss in buoyancy that may occur over the years.

Sometimes just a style change is in order. When our older daughter started to get fussy about wearing her nylon life jacket, we knew it was time to "up the cool factor" with a newer neoprene watersports vest. With a variety of materials and styles on the market, sometimes it takes a bit of trial and error to find the most comfortable life jacket for your child.

Remember that having a life jacket that kids actually want to wear, and will wear, is most important for their safety and for your peace of mind. ★



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