

Baby On-Board

Boating with the newest addition to your crew.

Boating was a big part of our life well before kids. It was a carefree lifestyle of cruising to waterfront destinations, leisurely anchoring out and partaking in quite a few happy hours back on the dock.

When starting a family was the next step for my husband and me, we heard a lot of comments like, “you’ll probably sell the boat when you have kids,” and “get ready, things are going to be different.” Well, they were right about one thing: Things were different. But we definitely did not sell the boat.

Having a little bundle of joy may have changed the way we boat, but it didn’t change the fact that we are boaters. A baby on-board our boat brought new experiences and new adventures.

Despite our somewhat feeble attempts to plan around boating season, both of our kids were born in the middle of summer. We had to take a break from boating a few weeks before and after they were born, but both kids were on our boat at 2 weeks old. Although there may not be an official course for “how to boat with a baby,” my experience having two summer boat babies made me a bit of a resident expert.

Is it safe to boat with a baby?

As a new parent (or even new grandparent), it’s only natural to be nervous about taking your new baby on a boat. That anxiety is probably even greater if you are a new parent who is also new to boating.

Having a baby should not stop you from enjoying boating. In fact, it’s actually much easier having a baby on a boat than an active toddler who has learned to climb and is anxious to test your limits (yes, 1- to 2-year-olds will be more challenging in many ways).

With a few extra safety precautions and the right gear, there really is no reason why you can’t bring a baby on your boat. Of course your boat size, how you use the boat and your baby’s age will likely play a part in what types of precautions you’ll need to take.

According to the U.S. Coast Guard’s Office of Boating Safety, an infant should not travel on a boat until they weigh at least 18 pounds and can wear a life jacket. Most babies will reach that weight when they are between 4 and 11 months old.

Although they should not travel on a boat when they are newborn babies, there is no reason why you can’t have a baby on a boat that is docked, anchored or moving slowly (at no-wake zone speeds of 6 mph) as long as the baby is wearing an infant life jacket.

Infant life jackets should be clearly marked as “infant” (typically under 30 pounds) and include a built-in “heads up” cushion with a loop handle at the top, along with a strap that goes between the legs to keep the jacket from sliding



up. Infant life jackets are intended to fit snug and raise the infant’s head out of the water.

Babies should be wearing a life jacket when boarding a boat and while underway. It’s very important not to place an infant in a car seat or other non-floating device when cruising in a boat.

Baby boat life

In my experience, babies love being out on the water. The fresh air, views of nature and gentle rocking can be very enjoyable for babies. In fact, our second baby had a bad case of colic and our weekend trips to the boat were very comforting for her.

You’ll want to take it easy the first few months. The first summer with our newborn baby, we kept boat rides and trips to a minimum. We remained docked most of the time — except for an occasional short putt-putt cruise to drop the hook at the cove across from our marina — but we still went to our boat every weekend.

Space is always a bit tight on a boat, so only bring baby essentials: A co-sleeper or rocker for a newborn, a changing pad for use on a berth, and a portable infant feeding seat as a highchair replacement.

It’s important to protect babies from the elements in the midst of summer. Newborn babies shouldn’t wear sunscreen, so keep them shaded under canvas and with a floppy sun hat. Also, be sure to keep them cool and avoid excessive heat. If you don’t have a boat cabin with AC, invest in a good battery-operated fan to keep them cool while napping.

With a focus on boat safety and special accommodations for cruising with kids, you can make boating as a family both enjoyable and safe — creating memories that will last a lifetime. ★



DIANE SELTZER is an avid boater, marketing director for SureShade sunshade systems, author of the children’s book “The Amazing Adventures of Boat Girl” and runs the boating lifestyle sites MYBOATLIFE.COM and BOATERKIDS.COM.