

Life Jackets

Things to consider when your child needs a life jacket – by Sue Howell



A child should be wearing their life jacket **before** stepping onto the dock. Incidents seem to occur in the time between arriving at the dock up until the boat pulls away from the dock with everybody and their stuff on board.

Practice in the pool. You child's comfort and familiarity in their jacket is essential. Repeat this practice according to their comfort level and changes in their swimming ability.

Consider the fit of jacket as needing to be part of the child's body... snug, especially the strap that goes between their legs.

Children should wear a Type II Jacket until they can perform the following skills:

- Dive down towards the pool bottom unassisted
- Take a breath during swimming with either head up or turning over to float

Type II Features

- Head Rest Pillow w/Loop
- All Flotation in Front
- Rated for less than 50 lbs
- Strap between the legs

When your child falls off the dock, **DO NOT** jump in on top of them. Your injuries are going to be more severe than theirs! Take a moment to observe them. Remember that you have let them be in the water before, wearing their jacket, so they are ok. Enter the water safely. You might be able to simply grab the boat hook and pull them up by the "pillow loop." From the dock go back to the shore and wade or swim to them. **If you are calm and in control, your child will be calm and in control.**

To Do Checklist for practice time...

I never do anything with a child in a life jacket that I have not already done many many times in the course of teaching them how to swim. So... you can rule out that I have ever taken a non-swimmer that doesn't know me and tossed them off a dock. This is not a testing process. It is a learning experience for your child.

- ✓ When putting the jacket on let them help you with the buckles. "We are pretending to go for a boat ride – let's find the buckles – help me push!" Let them hold a ring to pretend to drive the boat.

- ✓ Hold them & hug them like you always do in the water. Remember we are trying to make them comfortable... this should not be a struggle!
- ✓ Gently let them put their head back on the pillow. "Wow – you have your very own pillow – just rest – stay awake – where are you?" (getting eyes open). Now take them for a ride. Slowly move them through the water backwards. Now hold the pillow loop and take them for a ride. This simulates the way you would take them ashore, maybe to a beach!
- ✓ Encourage them throughout all this time to say "pick me up" and do it!
- ✓ Now it's time to make 2 splashes – a little one and a big one. Tell the child what you are going to do! No Surprises! I use an Elmo doll to demonstrate when appropriate. You want to see how quickly they pop up to the float position. You lift child from behind and they splash into the water face up. You can cue them to hold their breath if it is appropriate.
- ✓ Now recovering from face down position. It is my experience that children who have learned to swim do not want to pick up their head. (In a Type II jacket with no kicking head down they will flip to their back – float face up). You may need to teach them to pick their head up. I say "Find my hat!" The easiest way to teach "head up" is to pick up their feet and do a flip. They will flip and return to float position. You may have to commit to your child that you only need to do it one more time! Be true. Be honest. Remember you are trying to get them comfortable.
- ✓ Praise them the entire time. Talk softly. Be comfortable yourself. Ask them, "Would you like to take this off now? I am proud of you! You did a good job. Now we can have more fun when we go for a boat ride."

Sue Howell is a member of the US Swim School Association, the World Aquatics Babies Congress, & certified by the Fitness Institute Intl. She has been teaching children to swim in Northern Palm Beach County since 1979. Her US Water Fitness Certificate gives her much to offer the adult that wants to learn to swim for fun, health and state-of-mind. She is heavily involved in community efforts regarding swimming and water safety.

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