

SELECTING A LIFE VEST FOR YOUR CHILD. . .

What Is a Life Vest?

A life vest or a life jacket is a U.S. Coast Guard approved personal flotation device (PFD) that helps the wearer float if they enter the water.

Why Should Your Child Wear a Life Vest?

A child should wear a life jacket anytime they are near water such as in a boat or float tube as well as on docks and river banks and at the beach when allowed by the life guard.

Contrary to many TV shows and the movies, drowning is usually silent. A victim (of any age) in the process of drowning can NOT cry out for help. They just bob up and down in the water, their head tipped back, mouth wide open gasping for air, and they are silent. It takes as little as 30 - 45 seconds for a child non-swimmer and it usually happens when an adult is nearby but doesn't recognize the telltale signs of a child in distress in the water.

Buying a Child's Life Vest:

If you own a boat or plan on renting a boat or boating with a friend, you need to buy your child their own PFD. PFD's come in various types and sizes and there may not be a PFD of the proper size and type to rent or borrow.

When buying a child's life vest, check for:

U.S. Coast Guard approved label.

A snug fit. Check weight and chest size on the label and try the PFD on your child right at the store. Pick up your child by the shoulders of the PFD; and tell them to raise their arms and relax. The child's chin and ears won't slip through a properly fitting vest. Do NOT buy a vest that is too large, hoping the child will grow into it.

Head support for younger children. A well designed PFD will support the child's head when the child is in the water. The head support also serves to roll the child face up.

A strap between the legs for younger children. This helps prevent the vest from coming off over the child's head.

Comfort and appearance. This is especially important for teens, who are less likely to wear a PFD.

How Do You Use a Life Vest?

Every spring, check the life vest for fit as well as wear and tear. Throw it away if you find air leakage, mildew, rot or rust. Cut up discarded life jackets so someone else doesn't try to use them.

If a child panics in the water and thrashes about, they may turn onto his face, even though a PFD with a collar is designed to keep them on their back with face out of the water. Have your child practice wearing a life vest in the water - this will help prevent panic and rolling over.

Never cut or alter a PFD in any way. It will no longer be Coast Guard approved since it may lose its effectiveness.

Wear your own life vest to set an example for your child, and to enable you to help your child if an emergency occurs.

Never use toys like plastic rings, arm floaties or water wings in place of a PFD.

Don't try wrapping a life jacket around a car seat for your baby. Much of the time, a car seat expelled from a boat in a crash or capsizing accident will flip upside down, holding your baby's face under water.

Some infants are too small for any life jacket, even though the label may say 0-30 lbs.

In general, babies under 6 months or about 16 pounds are often too small for a life jacket to be effective due to the extreme size of their head in relationship to their body mass. If your infant is newborn, please consider waiting until the baby is a little older before taking them boating.

Remember: PFDs only work when they are worn, and they do not take the place of adult supervision!

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