



water safety

children, water sports and boating for a safe vacation

Water activities can provide your family with memorable and unique vacation experiences. Which activities are your children ready for?

Can my children participate in paddle sports?

Children who are wearing a personal flotation device (PFD) can join parents in calm water paddle sports such as rowing, kayaking and canoeing. Show all passengers safe seating arrangements within the boat, and how to enter and exit the boat safely. Adults should also wear PFDs in order to better assist children in an emergency. If you are renting equipment, ask the provider for safety tips, training if necessary, and whether there are any local water or weather conditions to consider.

Can my children participate in personal watercraft riding (such as jet-skis, wave runners)?

Personal watercraft (PWC) are particularly high risk and nobody under the age of 16 years should operate one. In many countries, previous boat education is required. Be sure all passengers wear a PFD, and observe speed limits and avoid wake-jumping. PWCs are not steered like other boats, and most accidents occur to renters with less than 20 hours experience. If you intend to take your older children for a ride, be sure you have had adequate practice and get familiar with the local waterway and rules first.

Can my children participate in motor-boating?

Children riding on motorboats should always wear a PFD, as should accompanying adults in order to be able

to better assist in case of an emergency. Have children observe safe seating arrangements, teach them how to enter and exit the boat safely, and show all passengers the location of the propeller, which poses a high injury risk to swimmers or in case of a fall overboard. All motorboats should have a fire extinguisher, a first aid kit, and an oar onboard. Never board a boat when you've been drinking alcohol.

Can my children participate in water skiing and tow sports?

Water skiing and similar tow sports are healthy family activities. Children should be taught the skills to water ski in calm water away from other swimmers and boaters. Always have one adult to drive the boat and one to observe the skier and the tow line. Add extra distance between other boaters, swimmers, and docks, rocks and buoys. Inspect your towline and equipment before each use to be sure it is in good condition.

Although it demands less skill, water-tubing, in which riders sit or lie on a tube and are pulled by the boat, poses a higher risk than water skiing because of the lack of control the boat operator and the rider have over the tube. Kite tubing, in which riders lie on an inflatable raft which becomes airborne when pulled, has been banned in the United States due to unacceptable risk, and can not be regarded as safe for children or adults.





Can my children snorkel?

Snorkelling offers a unique water experience for children who can swim well. Be sure to use appropriately fitted PFDs, masks, and mouthpieces, and practice first in still, shallow water, teaching children how to clear water from the snorkel. Coral reefs offer many exciting discoveries, but also can pose a risk of cuts and coral burns.

Have your children wear flippers to protect their feet and to allow them greater buoyancy and power. Keep children near, they may get frightened of marine life or panic if they swallow water through their snorkel. If you will be entering the water from a boat, be sure your children can re-enter the boat by themselves.

Can my child SCUBA dive?

SCUBA diving is a sport which requires significant training and skill, and bears great responsibility. SCUBA can be practiced safely under certain conditions with children who have received certification. Some organisations will begin training as young as 8 years of age, but many diving and medical professionals feel that training should not begin until age 12 – 14 years of age in order to allow the child to develop enough maturity to handle the equipment, follow non-verbal cues, and make sound judgements. Very small mistakes underwater can quickly become life-threatening should a child become anxious and follow the instinct to quickly ascend.

Seek out a training organisation which offers special training for children. A minimum height and weight of 150 centimetres and 45 kilograms is recommended by European medical studies. A reputable organisation will demand a medical clearance first, will have a 1-to-1 student-instructor ratio, and will only allow children to perform

short dives in shallow, warm water after a lengthy induction period in a swimming pool. Young divers are much more prone to “ear squeeze”, and become cold underwater more quickly than adults. Parents who dive may be eager to have their children join them, but snorkelling and other water activities offer many alternatives to SCUBA in the meantime.

Can my children dive safely?

Recreational diving is safe at a depth of 1.8 metres. Show children safe diving areas in pools as well as in open water. A dock, rock, or raft that may have offered a summer-full of fun diving last year could be life-threatening this year due to a lower water level or a sunken object. Teach your children to always enter water feet first.

Is my child ready for the “big pool?”

Modern pools are being designed with many fun features such as waterfalls, gradual entry inclines, huge waterslides, tidal pools, inflatable play islands, and underwater jets and benches. If your children are capable swimmers and wish to play in the “big pool,” take them on an exploratory tour of the pool and talk about the features.

Show them shallow areas, indicate safe diving zones, talk about the rules for use of the waterslide (for example, no tandem riding, wait until the other rider is off the slide). Point out any hard-to-see underwater features that could pose a risk, such as a hidden bench. Show them where you will be observing them from, the locations of any lifeguards as well. And maintain your supervision. There are on average 648 swimming pool injuries per day in the European Union. Prevent injuries from spoiling your family fun.

(printed May 2007)

