

Canadian Safe Boating Council ? Choosing the right life-jacket for your children is important

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Canadian Safe Boating Council

Part of the allure of recreational boating is that it can be enjoyed by young and old alike; so much so that many families often introduce their children to this activity as infants or toddlers.

However, with the inability of youngsters to fend for themselves should the unexpected occur, it's imperative that they wear a life-jacket to protect them against drowning. You may feel that, by cradling your child in your arms as the boat scoots along, they are safe but a sudden collision or capsizing of the boat could easily jar the child from your arms and be tossed into the water.

There are life-jackets on the market today that are specifically designed for infants as small as four kilograms (nine pounds). You want to protect your children as much as possible, but choosing the right life-jacket for them can sometimes be a daunting task. The first thing to keep in mind is, while you might normally purchase over-sized clothing for your children that they will grow into, using that same philosophy for choosing a life-jacket can result in tragedy. Unlike adult life-jackets, those made for children are sized based on weight range rather than being marked as small, medium or large. Make sure to look for the weight range that a particular child's life jacket is designed for. Other things to consider include ensuring that the life-jacket fits snugly but comfortably, doesn't ride up on their body when sitting down and that it doesn't chafe under their arms. There should also be a crotch strap that will keep the life-jacket from coming off over their head when they jump in the water. A padded head support with a grab strap is an added plus that will ensure their head is supported in the water and enable your child to be kept from floating away. Possibly, though, one of the most important considerations in the selection of a life-jacket is that they are of a colour or pattern that they like. That way, they will be more inclined to wear it.

As your children grow and wish to take a more active part in fishing, paddling, sailing or other water sport activities, it's beneficial to select a life-jacket that is designed with those activities in mind. For example, waterskiing, wakeboarding or personal watercraft-designed jackets are constructed with extra padding and belts in front to protect the wearer against injury from impacting the water at higher speeds. Similarly, life-jackets designed for paddling have deeper arm holes to provide maximum mobility throughout the paddle stroke. Those designed for fishing or hunting often have extra pockets for gear and may have a camouflage pattern.

Inflatable life-jackets are a very popular choice among boaters, but are only legal for wear by those 16 years of age or older who are not involved in an activity where they could be knocked unconscious such as skiing, wakeboarding, wake surfing, personal watercraft riding or white water kayaking. Further, they have to be worn at all times to be considered legal.

No matter what type of life-jacket you choose, the label must carry Transport Canada or Canadian Coast Guard approval to be legal for use. Keep in mind, too, that brighter coloured life-jackets are more easily spotted from a distance, in low light conditions or in fog.

It's a good idea before the start of each boating season to check the life-jacket used the previous year for fit and/or wear. Worn life-jackets with split seams, rips or those with zippers or clasps that are broken should be discarded. To be sure they will work properly when required, testing them on an annual basis is highly recommended. It's as easy as having them put on their life-jacket, wade into chest high water and lifting their feet. If they remain afloat, it works.

So when you're looking for the ideal life-jacket for your child or children, take these things into account. While it might cost you a bit more, going to a shop that has trained sales staff will help to ensure that your child gets exactly what he or she needs and wants for a fun season on the water.

While child life-jackets are extremely important, they are no substitute for close and continuous adult supervision in and around the water.