

Traveling the Trail with Children

While some sailors and other boaters can't imagine traveling with children aboard, families routinely cruise the Maine coast with kids. Children add another layer of complexity and responsibility to travels on the Trail, but they also bring an irrepressible joy and sense of wonder to outdoor explorations.

Here are some tips for sailing with children (adapted from a piece by Curtis Rindlaub, co-author of *A Cruising Guide to the Maine Coast*, who has cruised extensively with his two young children). Additional pointers at the end of this piece offer guidance on kayaking with children.

Safety

Safety is the first order of business so suit your children up in life jackets (also known as PFDs, or personal flotation devices) whenever they're by the water. Make sure the jackets are properly sized (weight ranges are generally printed inside the PFD) and that straps are adjusted for a snug fit. There are many comfortable PFD models now for children of all ages: have your child test them out in the store or check with outfitters for guidance (they use kids' PFDs routinely in classes and know which models kids will wear without protest). Get children into the PFD habit early and teach them—as soon as possible—how to zip and snap their own jackets. Small children and nonswimmers should have PFDs on whenever they are near the water—whether on a dock, in small craft, or in the cockpit of a larger vessel.

Maine law requires all children under age ten to wear life-jackets at all times when aboard boats. This law was developed with lake boaters in mind and has not yet been refined to cover those who live, eat and sleep aboard cruising vessels so use your judgement as to what is practical below decks. If PFDs are removed for eating or sleeping, keep them handy. It's best to make realistic rules (taking into account your children's ages and dispositions, your boat configuration, and the number of adults aboard for supervision) and then enforce those rules consistently.

To secure infants aboard larger cruising boats (where capsizing is not a risk), consider using a swing seat (adapted from a home swing) tied to the interior grab rails of the cabin. You can also tie an infant car seat into the boat and strap the baby in. At anchor, a bouncer (Johnny Jump Up) can be affixed to the boom, giving the baby a chance to work off pent-up energy.

Children of all ages need to have a clear sense as to what is and is not permissible on board. Give them specific directions as to when and where they can safely be—when the boat is at anchor, getting underway, and out sailing. For example, your children may be free to run around on deck when the boat's at anchor, but must be in the cockpit or cabin when underway. Whatever parameters you set, enforce them consistently.

If there is more than one child aboard, it may be helpful for the adults to agree who has primary responsibility for watching each child. That way both adults know who is the designated "first responder" if a situation arises that requires prompt attention.

Out on the water, children are particularly susceptible to sunburn and hypothermia. Have them wear sunhats (with good visors and ear/neck protection) and sunglasses to shield their eyes from glare. Try to minimize their time outside during the peak of the day (10 am to 2 pm), and apply a sunscreen with at least 30 SPF. Dress them in layers and make sure that they have adequate protection against the wind.

Engaging Children

Young children love to participate in what you are doing—whether it's steering the boat or preparing supper. Try to find meaningful ways that they can contribute, such as navigating for you when you row your dinghy, tying basic knots, or helping to dry dishes after a meal. The routines aboard ship are easier if done in the same way each time so they become habitual for the whole family. Having customary places the children sit (in the boat and the dinghy), for example, can simplify matters greatly.

Despite the confines of the boat, most young children will create their own entertainment (although it helps to have plenty of books, art supplies, and toys in reserve). You might consider bringing a small inflatable pool (that will fit in the cockpit) to provide water play and warm baths at anchor or on easy sails. When you're at anchor, give them ample opportunities to explore their surroundings and collect treasures (being careful to teach them low-impact principles—not disturbing live plants and animals). They can even help clean up the shore when a game is involved: Rindlaub and his children gather lobster bands on a "lobster stick" and clean up after careless mermaids who have left behind "sea china."

Being Adaptable

It may be easier at times to accommodate your children's schedules than to hold to familiar sailing habits. Try to plan your day so that you're ashore when they're most energetic and you sail when they are most tired and inclined to nap. You may want to sail in shorter legs, especially with younger children. Keep in mind that plans may go awry—and both parents and children can end up overtired. As Rindlaub notes, "Sometimes it seems as though there simply is no rest. If the children don't need attending to, the boat does...." And the boat invariably needs extra attention with children aboard—between superballs jammed in the cockpit scuppers and juice spilled across the cabin.

While sailing with kids is rarely tranquil or restorative, it gives children experiences and memories that will last a lifetime. They learn to live in close quarters and respect others, to help with chores and to keep themselves safe. Above all, they savor the joy of discovery. And the adults with them share in that joy.

Paddling with Kids

Much of the guidance offered for cruising with children applies to families paddling, only more so. Make sure your children wear properly sized PFDS at all times around the water, and teach them early about safe boating practices (such as keeping their weight low and to the center of the boat). Be extra-vigilant about sun and wind protection as children in small boats can be exposed to intense glare and the full strength of coastal breezes.

Only those who are experienced paddlers should consider taking young children (those under age 5 or 6 who don't yet swim) out in a kayak or canoe along the coast. Young children are particularly vulnerable traveling on Maine's cold waters since they have little body mass to resist hypothermia. Even when coastal water temperatures reach their peak in August and September, the water remains cool enough to bring on hypothermia quickly (see the sections on safe paddling and in-water survival on pages 300-307).

If you do paddle with young children, invest in a properly sized wetsuit for them. Wetsuits are now available even in toddler and infant sizes: if your local supplier of outdoor gear does not carry them, an internet search will reveal many sources. On top of the wetsuit, add layers of polypropylene or fleece as needed—paying particular attention to keeping the head warm. Remember that your child is not exercising as you are, so dress them more warmly than you are dressed. Pack plenty of extra warm clothes in dry bags since children will get wet far more often than adults in the course of their travels.

Children may want to snack frequently, so load up on healthy trail food that they can eat in the boat (including some special foods not eaten at home). Keep food accessible in case stretches of paddling take longer than expected and you need to provide an impromptu meal en route.

In single kayaks, small children can sit between the legs of the adult (until their presence interferes with paddling). Bigger children can use the front seat of a tandem. Add extra weight (water containers work well) in the forward cockpit to keep the boat properly trimmed. Depending on their size and stamina, children can do some solo paddling in small kayaks from the age of 6 to 8 on—but be prepared to do plenty of towing when they tire.

In canoes, young children can sit on a low camp chair (the portable nylon kind used by backpackers) between the center thwarts, or even in a car seat strapped onto a thwart (just don't buckle the child in). Children also may enjoy sitting up near the bow paddler, using their own small canoe paddle or "fishing" over the side. If you improvise seating arrangements for children on top of trip gear, remember to keep their weight low in the boat to ensure stability.

Trip planning is particularly critical when paddling with young children. Select sites close to shore and make sure that you have alternate lodgings in the case of a sudden change in wind or weather. Plan on traveling short distances, with many more stops than you would ordinarily make. Be prepared for lots of singing and storytelling as the confines of a kayak or canoe may not give children sufficient space to create their own entertainment. Having a few small toys or books (packed in waterproof bags) can be a useful fallback.

For more guidance on paddling with children, see the following piece on kayaking the Maine Island Trail with children. Material in the cruising section of this piece was adapted with permission from Curtis Rindlaub's "Sailing with Children," in *A Cruising Guide to the Maine Coast* (Fourth Edition), by Hank and Jan Taft and Curtis Rindlaub (Peaks Island, ME: Diamond Pass Publishing, 2002), www.coastguides.com.