What You Should Know About Personal Flotation Devices

Large bodies of water have always called my name. Whether it be the ocean, the river, the lake or a pool, that shiny coolness silently invites me to jump right in. I know I am not the only one!

I have learned a lot about water safety in my seven years as an Infant Swimming Resource (ISR) instructor. ISR teaches water safety and survival skills for children ages 6 months to 6 years old. But, it is not just about teaching young children -- I care about teaching everyone water safety to protect children. Drowning is a leading cause of accidental death for children in the United States, and four times as many children as those who die from drowning are left with permanent brain damage after a near-drowning incident. Knowing how to stay safe in, on, or around water is critical. The use of proper flotation devices is one important step you can take to keep children safe. Here are two things you should know about flotation devices:

Throw Those Floaties Out!
Between the bright colors, the characters, the fun, and the freedom “floaties” appear to offer, the dangers they present might surprise you. The American Academy of Pediatrics says to, “Avoid inflatable swimming aids such as ‘floaties.’ They are not a substitute for approved life jackets and can give children and parents a false sense of security.” The term “floaties” refers to any device you put on your child or put them into that makes them float in water, including water-wings, inflatable swim rings, infant neck rings, and pool noodles. If the flotation device makes you as a parent or guardian feel like your child is safe in the water without knowing how to swim, or if it makes your child feel like they can swim and holds them vertically in the water, it should be avoided.

Floaties can make children feel comfortable and excited in the water, and many kids feel as though they can swim. Sometimes, parents think so too, saying, “they can swim with their floaties on.” That is not swimming. Being vertical in the water and using a ladder climbing motion to move with the head tilted back to get air is the position of drowning.
Being comfortable and excited about water and only having the knowledge of how to drown is a dangerous combination. Muscle memory is so powerful. For young children in the water, muscle memory is significantly increased because they are sensory-motor learners and the water is an ultra-sensory environment. From the way water touches their skin and how their body moves in it, to breathing, kicking or flailing -- everything children do is teaching their body how to behave in the water. You can imagine how detrimental it can be if a child’s only experience in the water is in the drowning position.

It may seem as though this position is similar to treading water and it is, but most kids are physiologically unable to tread water until approximately age 6 because their head is a large proportion of their body weight, making it difficult to keep it above water. I would recommend kids and adults learn to float instead. It is recommended that if you fall in the river, you should float with your feet downstream and work your way over to shore. If you get sucked in by a riptide, remain calm, float and then work your way toward shore. Staying calm and keeping your body relaxed while finding a way out increases chances of survival.

Use Proper Life Jackets Appropriately
Lifejackets are a very important layer of protection. Having a properly-fitting lifejacket and knowing when to use it determines how effective that layer will be. Using lifejackets on water crafts and by moving water can save lives. When looking for a life jacket, you need to be sure of a few things:

1. Make sure the lifejacket you are using is U.S. Coast Guard Approved.
2. Be wary of hand-me-down life jackets. The foam and fabric can deteriorate and become ineffective.
3. Follow the weight recommendations for life jackets, and do not round up your child’s weight. If your child is 28lbs, they need to be in an infant lifejacket that is for kids under 30 lbs.
4. Life jackets are not a swim toy. If you put your child in a lifejacket to swim around, they are going to learn the same drowning behaviors they would swimming in a floaty. This goes for puddle jumpers, too.
5. Tighten all straps in the lifejacket so that it moves as little as possible up, down or side to side on your child in the water. It will not work properly if it is not tightened correctly.
6. Test your child’s life jacket in the water. Have them float in it so they know what it feels like.

It is imperative to note that lifejackets are not a substitute for adult supervision or swim instruction. Formal swim instruction has shown an 88% decrease in the risk of drowning for kids. Swimming is not just another sport or activity, it is a life-saving skill. Proper instruction at an early age can lead to a lifetime of safe water enjoyment. Skill first, fun forever! Have a safe and fun Montana summer.

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