**Open Water and Boating Safety: Talking Points for Educators (Parents/Caregivers)**

**Key Messages**

**Defining Open Water/Boating-Related Drowning Deaths (Background for the Educator)**

* Drowning is a leading cause of death for children; for children ages 1-14, drowning is the 2nd leading cause of unintentional injury death and is the 3rd leading cause among children ages 15-19.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* In 2019 alone, there were almost 900 fatal drownings among children between the ages of 0-19.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* More children and teens drown in open water vs. pools.
  + Open water is defined as natural bodies of water, such as lakes, rivers, ponds, and oceans.[[3]](#footnote-3)
* As children age, the risk of open water drowning rises. In fact, in 2019, 70% of the children ages 15-19 who drowned, did so in natural or open waters.
* Males are at the greatest risk of fatal drowning. The natural water fatal drowning rate is more than four times higher for boys compared to girls.3
* There are also disparities by race in natural water settings. Overall, American Indian/Alaskan Native children have the highest rates of fatal open water drowning, followed by Black/African American children. The risk of drowning in open water among Black/African American children between the ages of 10-19 is two times higher than their White peers.3
* Drowning remains a leading cause of death for children with autism and accounts for approximately 90 percent of deaths associated with elopement (wandering) by those age 14 and younger.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**What Can Parents and Caregivers Do? (Key Messages to Discuss with Families)**

To help prevent open water and boating-related childhood deaths, it is important for parents and caregivers to create layers of protection and reduce drowning risks for children every moment they are in or around open water – this includes when they are swimming, kayaking, floating, boating, or even playing on or fishing off a dock.

* Open water Safety Tips:
  + **Ensure your child is wearing a U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket at all times in or around open water.** 
    - Adult-sized life jackets may not work for children. A proper fitting life jacket will fit snugly but comfortably and should not be allowed to rise above the child’s chin or ears.
      * <https://www.safekids.org/video/how-fit-life-jacket>
      * <https://www.uscgboating.org/images/howtochoosetherightlifejacket_brochure.pdf>
    - Floats, such as tubes, air mattresses or ‘floaties’ are toys and are not substitutes for a life jacket.
    - Life jackets provide buoyancy, but different body types float differently; make sure you find a fit that accommodates your child’s body.
    - Ensure that the life jacket is in good working condition. At the beginning of each boating season:
      * Check that all hardware and straps are in good shape, firmly attached, and in working order.
      * Faded material can indicate loss of strength. Weathered lifejackets may tear more easily and can result in loss of flotation material.
      * Check for leaks, mildew, & oil saturation in the fabric.
      * Make sure there are no rips or tears in the fabric.
      * Make sure the label stating USCG approval is attached, and that it is readable.
      * Discard and replace life jackets that show signs of deterioration – faded material, tears, mildew stains, punctures, etc. When not in use, store lifejackets in a dry, cool, and dark place.
    - A life jacket cannot do what it is made to do unless it is worn!
  + **Children should not be allowed to swim alone in open water.** 
    - Choose a Water Watcher. When there are several adults present, choose one to be responsible for watching children in or near the water for a certain period of time, such as 15 minutes. After 15 minutes, select another adult to be the Water Watcher. This applies not only when a child is in the water, but also when on the dock.
    - Only allow children to swim in designated areas in lakes or where a lifeguard is present. These areas are usually roped off to indicate a more shallow and safer floor.
  + **Know the signs of drowning and how to respond in an emergency.** 
    - Signs of drowning:
      * Child cannot yell for help. (\*Instructor: Note to audience that drowning is often depicted incorrectly in movies.)
      * If adult calls to child or asks them if they are ok and they give no answer or look at adult with a blank stare, this may indicate child is struggling and needs assistance.
      * Head back and low in the water with mouth at water level
      * Not using legs; person is vertical in the water, often bobbing up and down
      * Appears to be climbing an invisible ladder or pressing down on water to raise head
    - How to respond in an emergency
      * Call 911 or get the attention of a lifeguard, if present.
      * “Reach or Throw, don’t go” is the instruction from the water safety community. It is safest to reach for the child or throw them a buoyant object.
      * Learn CPR.
* Boating Safety Tips:
  + Know the weather conditions before heading out on a boat. If storms are in the forecast, play it safe and stay in. Stay alert for changes while you are at the site and stay out of the water if you hear thunder or see lightning.
  + Have a float/fishing/boating plan and make family members or friends who will not be with you aware of those plans.
  + When boating, use an engine cut-off switch and be sure to follow the instructions as provided. The cut-off switch is designed to be attached to the person so that in the event the boat operator falls or is thrown from the vessel, the engine cut-off switch will shut down the engine and propellers, preventing a potential propeller strike.
  + Children should not jump from a moving boat or one with the engine running. If the engine is on, so are the propellers!
  + Prevent carbon monoxide poisoning on boats. Children should not ride or hang on the swim platform or swim near the exhaust (usually the back of the boat). Educate children on carbon monoxide poisoning and have them alert an adult with any signs, such as headache, dizziness, confusion, nausea, weakness, vomiting, or chest pain.
* Additional Resources for Boating Safety
  + [U.S. Coast Guard](https://www.uscgboating.org/)
  + [National Safe Boating Council](https://www.safeboatingcouncil.org/resources/)
  + [Kids Don’t Float](http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/boating/kdfhome.htm)
  + [Boat US Foundation](https://www.boatus.org/)
  + [California Department of Boating and Waterways](http://www.dbw.ca.gov/)

**Additional Tips for Parents and Caregivers**

* Open water is **very different** than pool water
* Natural waters are typically murky, reducing visibility if a child   
  falls in the water, and potentially hiding hazards, such as rocks, logs,   
  uneven surfaces and sudden drop-offs.
* Unlike a pool, open water rarely has depth markings, which makes it harder for parents to know when a child is getting out of his or her depth.
* Open water usually involves larger distances than a pool, and it can be hard to perceive how far away the shore is.
* Water in rivers, creeks and streams constantly flows downstream, creating currents that can be fast moving and unpredictable due to changes under the surface of the water.
* Ocean waves and rip currents are also of concern. Even at guarded   
  beaches, wave activity can be dangerous, particularly breaking waves. A rip current is a long, narrow band of water that can pull a swimmer away from shore and out into the ocean in just a few seconds.
* Typically, open water is much cooler than a pool and swimming in open water requires more effort.
  + - Water temperature has a strong impact on how a person reacts when entering the water. It can also affect swimming ability.
    - Hypothermia can begin in water temperatures of 70 degrees, so be aware of water temperatures before boating.
    - Assure children are dressed for the water temperature, not the air temperature.
    - Lake temperatures can be checked and are updated daily at <https://anglerspy.com/>
* **Swim lessons** are a great layer of protection for open water safety.
  + Note: Even strong swimmers have a harder time in open water
  + Equip child with the 5 basic water survival skills and ensure he/she can:
    - Step or jump into water over their head and return to the surface
    - Turn around in the water and orient to safety
    - Float or tread water
    - Combine breathing with forward movement in the water
    - Exit the water
* **Take a boating safety course**. Have older children attend class with parents. Each state has different boating license requirements. Approved courses can be found here (by state): <https://idash.nasbla.net/idashboards/viewer/?guestuser=guest&dashID=233&c=0>
* Designate a **sober driver** for the boat.
* **Create a safe and child-friendly space on y**our boat.
  + Assure there are no sharp objects the child could step on or loose items to trip over.
  + Secure or lock doors so that children cannot wander onto the swim platform or into an unsupervised area.
  + As you would in your home, keep any chemicals or cleaners stored out of the reach and sight of children.
  + Cover the helm – lots of little buttons will be enticing to children. If possible, snap on a cover to enclose the controls.
  + Do not leave keys in the ignition.
  + Keep any gear such as boat line, fishing gear, and air horns locked up or out of the reach of children.
  + Cover any outlets, just as you would in the home.
* Allow children to only be on a boat when **adult supervision** is present (no playing on boat when docked, etc.).
* **Secure child when docking** if no other adult is there to supervise.
* Ensure **rescue equipment** is in working order and easily accessible (ring preserver, flare, etc.).
* As on land, protect child with **sunscreen,** hat, etc.
* **Cold Water Safety Facts and Tips**
  + Body heat is lost 4 times faster in cold water than cold air.
  + Wearing and life jacket significantly increases chances of survival in cold water.
  + Hypothermia can happen as quickly as one minute after entering cold water. When you have hypothermia, your core body temperature begins to drop and your physical and cognitive abilities begin to decline as well.
  + For more cold water safety tips, visit the [U.S. Coast Guard](https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/DCO%20Documents/5p/CG-5PC/CG-CVC/CVC3/notice/flyers/Cold_Water_Survival_Hypothermia.pdf).

**Additional Resources for Parents and Caregivers**

* How to choose the right life jacket
  + <https://www.uscgboating.org/images/howtochoosetherightlifejacket_brochure.pdf>
* Water Watcher card
  + <https://www.safekids.org/other-resource/water-watcher-card>
* Open water checklist
  + <https://www.safekids.org/checklist/open-water-safety-checklist>
* Lake water temperatures source
  + <https://anglerspy.com/>
* Boating License courses by state
  + <https://idash.nasbla.net/idashboards/viewer/?guestuser=guest&dashID=233&c=0>
* Video: How to properly fit a life jacket
  + <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5iNjvx62zI>
* Video: Engine cut-off switch
  + <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TD1uZBktG0I>
* Video: Carbon monoxide poisoning
  + <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1jAobkyzPc>
* Testimonial videos:
  + Phyllis Kopytko – kill switch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW7151iup0k&list=PLgOje37c-b1P97AslPoTtqfA3sTetv9Jt&index=2>
  + Dana Gage – life jacket wear

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxRaAzJqjE0>

* + Michael Fugate – life jacket wear/cold water

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogHJ1-S6Gm4>

* + Camilla Molica – life jacket wear/cold water

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SO5gGMhvHQg>

* + Cassandra Free – carbon monoxide poisoning

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GYH3iv-uNs>

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *Drowning prevention*. <https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/facts/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) [online]. (2020) [2021 Oct 22]. Available from URL: <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/fatal-reports> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Safe Kids Worldwide. (2018). *Hidden hazards: An exploration of open water drowning and risks for children*. <https://www.safekids.org/sites/default/files/water_safety_study_2018.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. National Autism Association. *Autism and safety facts*. <https://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/autism-safety-facts/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)