

Kids aboard

Having children doesn't have
to spell the end
of your favourite
pastime.

By Emma George

Having children is life-changing in many ways, but it doesn't mean you have to leave your family at home to go boating or let your vessel accumulate cobwebs! It just requires a more organised and flexible approach.

Life is busy and sometimes it can be difficult to find family time, but boating provides the ideal opportunity to spend quality time together out on the water.

When I think of special family moments, many of these have been on our boat: watching whales breach close by; having pods of dolphins play alongside; seeing the kids land their first fish; snorkelling over spectacular coral reefs or interacting with sea lions; and squashing all five of us in the front cabin for an overnight adventure.

It can be difficult knowing when to introduce your child to boating, but I believe it's best when the parents feel comfortable doing so.

We took our first child, Austin, when he was six-months-old, on a very calm day and we didn't stray far from the boat ramp.

WATER BABES

Pre-kids, we would be out boating almost every weekend, but during Austin's first 12-months, we were sleep-deprived parents and our beloved boat hardly ventured out of the driveway. With our next two boys, we were more confident, so they started boating well before they could crawl.

Although lifejacket regulations vary from state to state, we always ensure our boys wear a correct fitting PFD while on the boat.

They have been wearing PFDs since they were babies and now put them on automatically – despite the fact they have learnt to swim, it is still a very important safety precaution.

Sourcing a PFD type I tiny enough for a baby can be a challenge, but we bought one that was from 3kg upwards – perfect for little fellows. Prior to going on the boat, I got the kids used to wearing their jackets and even tested them in the pool to ensure they floated correctly.

The most important precaution for us is weather. We only take the kids out if it is calm and the forecast is good for the entire day. We don't want to put our boys in a risky situation or give them such a fright that they never want to go out in the boat again.

Flexibility is imperative, as you may need to change the date or location due to weather, go



home early if a child is tired, unhappy or even worse, seasick.

WITHIN LIMITS

Trips need to be within your kids' limits. We have made the mistake of trying to do too much, such as deep-water fishing, snorkelling, beach combing and picnics, but in the end, it's exhausting and they just want to go home. Now our kids are older, they are involved in the decision-making process and we generally plan a couple of activities, leaving on a positive note, with them wanting more.

I always have a back-up plan in case things start to fall apart. That may be the special teddy for our youngest, a treat for good listening, or an ice cream at Rottneest Island before we go home.

If the fish have been biting, but the kids were ready to go, I have also been guilty of handing

Opposite: Trying to fish with three little kids is bedlam, but somehow we manage to catch a couple for dinner. The key is keeping them all busy – a net, a rod, some snacks and a few toys generally does the job.

Above: Our kids have grown up on boats and, even at a young age, they are competent at balancing and holding on.



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Above: A good way to check your PFD is doing the right job is to test it in the pool. Cooper is just two-months-old and not one drop of water went near his mouth, apart from the ones his brother splashed.

Below: With three active boys, sometimes you have to find a beach and let them run wild. After a big mission to the Abrolhos Islands, the boys delighted in finding 'lost treasures'.



them the iPad to keep them occupied for half an hour. It gives my husband and I a chance to catch dinner – when you are fishing with three kids, it can be a challenge to get some rod time!

Taking kids requires a team effort and you need a minimum of two adults to ensure one person can supervise or hold children, especially during transit. We are lucky that our kids are all over two years apart, so our eldest was basically independent by the time another baby arrived.

When our kids were little, there were a few things we did to make our boating days happier for all concerned.

CABIN COMFORT

We created a place for them inside the cabin where they would not fall off the bed and could have a daytime sleep when we were anchored. The rocking motion of the boat often kept them asleep for an hour or more, giving us an ideal opportunity to have a quick fish.

When anchored, we would hang a swing from the rocket-launcher, which enabled them to get a better view of what was going on – and we always took a few plastic toys to keep them occupied.

Now that our boys are aged eight-, six- and three-years-old, I feel we have finally cracked it and boating has become a breeze. No more nappies, bottles, or day sleeps and more time to play. The boys all have their sea legs and, with a few years of boating behind them, they hold on well and are sensible on the boat. I am not sure if it was early exposure to the ocean or just good luck, but none of our children get seasick, something I am forever grateful for.

Now that they are older, the boys help plan our boating adventures. At the moment their favourite activities are fishing, snorkelling and beach combing, which is pretty easy to combine in a day.

Austin started snorkelling in the ocean when he was four, after practising in the bath and then the pool. But when our youngest arrived, he would cry when the two bigger boys went snorkelling and asked to go too. So, at two-years of age, he would jump off the back of the boat in his little swim vest and goggles. We always put some breadcrumbs in the water to attract fish so they don't have to swim far to see some action.

Boating plays a large role in our family and when it was time to upgrade our ageing motors and hull, we made the decision to buy a new boat instead, which would suit our family for years to come.

SAFETY FIRST

With three young children to consider, our priorities had changed from our first boat purchase 10 years ago, and now safety was at the top of our list. Given our propensity to fish wide offshore, we wanted dual motors, the boat had to be very stable, with full flotation, a self-draining



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deck, on a trailer, and big enough to fit us all in for an overnight stay.

The perfect fit for us was a LeisureCat Gamefisher 7000 and, after much deliberation, we decided to make a big lifestyle investment and purchased one.

We have had our new boat for just over a year and we are out most weekends, fishing, snorkelling and exploring. We even took the kids to the Abrolhos Islands, where we snorkelled the Batavia shipwreck and visited forts constructed over 360 years ago.

Although adventures are fun, the kids enjoy simple activities just as much. Every autumn, they look forward to prawning in the river with their friends. The tradition is pizza on the boat, followed by a great evening of scooping for prawns.



Above: PFDs, sunscreen, hats and sunglasses are good safety measures to get your child accustomed to.

Left: Pizzas and PFDs – a good boating mix.




The kids also love to scoop the big jellyfish carried downstream in the current and net small baitfish, which are attracted to the lights.

There are so many fun activities to do with kids on a boat, ranging from river cruises, fishing and exploring inlets and lakes, crabbing, tubing, picnics, snorkelling, or discovering a remote beach. So on a nice day, clear the calendar and plan a family boating trip – the kids will love it. Take the opportunity to spend quality time together – it creates common interests and bonds with your children that will last a lifetime.

Essentials:

1. Lifejacket PFD Type I
2. Sunscreen, hat and sunglasses
3. Water, food and snacks
4. Change of clothes, bathers
5. Bassinet, bedding for babies
6. Toys/swing/beanbag

Safety checklist:

1. Ensure children are wearing correct-fitting PFDs
2. Don't take risks, check where you are going, what the conditions are and take necessary precautions
3. Do not strap children into boats using harnesses such as car or bike seats, and hold them during transit
4. Keep sharp objects such as hooks, knives and pliers out of reach
5. Try to keep the deck clear so it reduces the chance of tripping
6. Crush barbs on all hooks and trebles as they can be removed far more easily if there is an incident
7. Ensure children are out of the way when anchoring, coming alongside jetties and bringing fish onboard – especially 'toothy' varieties like sharks and mackerel
8. Keep a well-equipped first aid kit on your boat at all times
9. Ensure you carry all the necessary safety equipment and someone knows where you are going and when you plan to return home. 

ABOUT EMMA GEORGE

Emma George holds 16 world records in women's pole vault, represented Australia at the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000, and won gold at the 1998 Commonwealth Games and medals at numerous World Championship events. A keen angler, snorkeler and scuba diver, Emma bought her first boat in 1995 and now owns a LeisureCat 7000 Gamefisher. Living in Perth with her husband Ashley and their three young children, she loves nothing more than getting out on the ocean with her family and enjoying the wonderful boating opportunities along Australia's west coast.



Above: Whales, warships and wonders of the deep keep young boatie minds occupied.