

SIT-ON-TOP KAYAKS AND CHILDREN



THINK SMALL

- It's easy for a carer to view a sit-on-top as a means to continue their paddling by bringing the children along. Wrong. Think small and put your desires to paddle round the headland on the back burner.
- Young children are rarely prepared to put up with the same activity for long periods of time. You will only stress yourself out trying to persuade a child to paddle to explore the cave or bay you have set your sights on. Instead switch on your own 'child's eyes' and learn to

explore the sea shore. Build in plenty of stops and go exploring.

- Share the moments together and you will discover things you normally paddle past.
- Small people use up lots of energy. Take plenty of snacks and drinks along. Snack stops are a great highlight and motivator especially if there is an ice cream stop.
- Avoid trying to coach children on the finer points of paddle technique in the early stages. That will come later as they start to wonder how you manage to move the sit-on-

top. Focus on having fun and the development of balance and water confidence. Better still join in this together.

KIT

- How would you feel if you were expected to wear gear three sizes too big for you? I often see children using inappropriately sized clothing and paddles. It's a guaranteed turn off and is unsafe.
- Buy a wetsuit. They provide some warmth, flotation, sun protection and cushion bumps and bangs. A wetsuit also increases the time children can spend messing about in the water. Monitor how long children spend in the water as they can suddenly tire and get cold and bring some warmer clothing with you.
- Cagoules and hats provide warmth and sun protection. Even on a sunny day, the air temperature can be cooler on the sea. Add sun cream, sunglasses and a pair of wetsuit booties and you make the ocean a big bath to splash about in.
- Young children may not do much paddling, even with a paddle. This is when a tandem or larger three seater is ideal. Sitting even a small child on a solo kayak with you is generally often only suitable very close to shore when playing about as it is hard for you to paddle.
- Give a small child a junior sized paddle and they stop being a passenger and become a kayaker.
- Set a good example.

Everyone must wear a buoyancy aid and ensure your child has an age appropriate size, which is correctly fitted.

- You'll know when you are getting it right when children start wanting to jump into the ocean and bob about. I recall one young girl who decided to leap off the tandem as we rounded a headland. Her Dad looked surprised as she was normally nervous of deep water.
- Some families who manage the desire of their child to paddle solo by tying a long length of cord to the stern so they can stop them paddling too far out. Being pulled back to shore is also good fun.

JOIN IN THE FUN

If you all practice balance and games together everyone learns the

limitations of the sit on top. If you ever fall in you will all be able to sort it out more quickly and safely.

STAYING SAFE

When using a tandem do not paddle without another adult on the water paddling a second sit-on-top. This provides safety cover if you and your child fall in. If you do paddle with just your child stay very close to shore in water you can easily stand up in. Resist the temptation to just paddle a bit more around the next headland. It will be here for another day.

- Go with other families. It's more fun and you will paddle at a child centred pace.
- Attend a safety clinic because it is easy to put off practising assisted/self rescues unless you sign up for a course. The last thing a child wants is to realise that the adults are also getting scared. Training will open your horizons. I recall finding one family having a picnic at an offshore tower 1 mile out to sea. The Dad had been on my course and was now putting into the practice the skills and knowledge to judge just when it would be ideal to take the family out for the afternoon.
- Children often want to swim and play in the water, check the water quality is safe for swimming.
- Learn about tides and currents. One parent had to be towed back around a headland by a fishing boat with his two children on board. His wife subsequently signed him onto a course. Knowledge will also help you to answer some of the "Why does..." and "what is...." questions better.
- Wind can be a problem with some sit on tops, especially tandems with a small person on board. Check the wind direction and strength before you go afloat. Take a moment to turn around and paddle back to shore after setting off to check what the wind strength will feel like on return.
- When children stop paddling they quickly get cold. Land and put on extra clothing. If you cannot easily do this then you have not planned very well.
- The younger the child, the better the weather needs to be. It is often more fun when the sun is out. I often

cancel trips with families before I cancel adult and teenage tours if I think the wind is too strong for small children afloat.

CHOOSING A SIT ON TOP

There is no point in buying all the kit to discover that you or your child does not like the experience, so book a short sit on top kayak tour for a trial run.

- Try before you buy and go to a specialist shop to get a wide choice and advice.
- Ask other kayaking parents for advice or check out Internet forums. They sometimes have threads on kayaking with children.
- Tandem sit-on-tops is a good option for most children under 9 years. Children feel secure paddling with their parent. When they get tired you can do all the paddling.
- Three seater sit-on-tops exist. Check you all fit on board. It is often very difficult for a child to paddle when seated in the middle.
- Most tandem sit-on-tops, even those sold with a middle seat position, are not very good for solo paddling. This can be a good excuse to buy a solo kayak as well which also gives added safety afloat when you paddle together.
- If children are small, move their front seat further forward. This will trim the sit-on-top and helps counter the craft being turned by the wind.
- Invest in a trolley. Moving kayaks up and down a beach is likely to cause back injuries and arguments. It also makes it easier to justify going afloat for a short time.
- Once children start getting hooked on paddling they will start to want their own sit-on-top. Buy a child sized craft. Some junior designs are very efficient and great fun.
- Carry a towline. It's a helping hand when children are paddling solo and get tired. Towing is also a great way for the adults to get a bit more of a work out.
- Get it right and there will be lots of opportunities for you to get out kayaking in more challenging environments with your children in the future. Just remember to focus on your child's needs and experiences.

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Derek has kayaked for over forty years. He works with many families who want to get afloat. He has undertaken multi-day kayak trips with his own children around the Jersey coastline and also in Canada.