

Swimming Floatation Devices - Devices Heaven Sent or Dangerous

By
Ed Pemberton

Picture the children playing in the water for hours on end. Nice cool water and the children having lots of fun. An additional treat is the parents can sit out of the water with minimal supervision and visit, play cards, drink a beer and relax. What can be wrong with that??

Parents feel the children are getting acclimated to the water environment and will learn to “really swim” in their own good time. If you live near a lake or have a boat it is tempting to have the children play in the water wearing their lifejackets. How about living on a houseboat and the children can play in the water hours on end and be “safe.”

What could be wrong with this? Here are a few things to think about.

1. Children usually lose their automatic instinct to move arms and legs to swim to the surface. They are waiting for their body to just “pop” up to the surface. Children will lose this instinct to swim up to the surface after just a few times using these devices. Most everyone will instinctively try to swim to the surface from underwater. A child will lose this instinct if they have repeatedly jumped into the water and had a floatation device push them to the surface. The child may panic when they fall into the water and possibly drown because his/her face doesn’t quickly pop out of the water. I distinctly remember a boy, age 6, whose grandfather had a houseboat on a local lake. Trevor spent every weekend all summer long playing in the water with his lifejacket securely fastened to his body. In the swim class he had no fear of the water but I had to swim underwater to pull him to the surface for quite a long time during the class. I would pull him to the surface where he would smile at me and sink back underwater. He had to learn that he had to do something to come up and stay on the surface.

2. Comfort with face underwater. The second thing is that with floatation devices the person is usually only underwater for no longer than half a second. The device pops them up quickly. To be able to swim properly the person must be comfortable while either holding their breath or exhaling with their face underwater for at least five seconds at a time. Floatation devices restrict the ability to do that. The position of the head determines the swimmers body position. If the head is up the hips and legs sink underwater. It takes a long time to train the child that they have to keep their face underwater for the 5 seconds required while swimming the crawl stroke.

3. Head held high out of water. Floatation devices usually hold the child’s head high above the water. Often the face and head stay dry. In swimming you must get a breath close to the surface of the water. You can’t lift your head far out of the water to get good quick breaths. In swim classes, children who have worn floatation devices will struggle to get the head so far out of the water that their legs sink to a point where they cannot swim. A boy who grew up living at a beachside home in Virginia swam in the ocean, wearing a life jacket that held his head 10 inches over the surface of the water every day all summer long from age 3 thru 6. His family moved inland and he did not go swimming for 2 years. He had to repeat the same level class three times to get comfortable getting a breath with his face close to the water.

4. Body position. Floatation devices usually keep the child vertical. The more exposure a child has to being vertical, the harder it is for them to feel comfortable in a horizontal position that is necessary for proper swimming.

The proper swimming position is horizontal with the head, hips, hands and heels at the surface. The head controls the body position. If a child lifts the head up the legs tend to go deeper into the water. If the hips are 12 inches under water, the drag (resistance) on the body is doubled. This means the child will have to work twice as hard to move the same distance thru the water.

When stressed (fearful) children who have been vertical in the water will instinctively do a bicycle kick that will pull their legs underwater rather than splash at the surface where they should be. In the vertical position they will not be able to swim or stay afloat.

5. In times of stress a person will go back to the first thing they have learned, instinctively. If a person learns that something (floats) will always keep them afloat and they do nothing, they will go back to that even if they are not wearing them at all. This is a true story that happened a few years ago in a college basketball tournament. The star player had the ball. His team was behind by one point. They had 5 seconds to go on the game. He got the ball and was in position to shoot a jump shot, a shot he had successfully made for years. The crowd was wild. Everyone was on their feet and the noise was deafening. He worked clear but instead of shooting as he had done for years, he got very low with his elbow near his knee as he lowered his shoulder under the ball like he had done as a 6 year old child shooting at a 10 foot basket. The ball flew into the bleachers. In time of extreme stress he reverted to the first thing he ever learned. The same thing will probably happen when a person panics in the water. This may be the reason good swimmers drown when they accidentally fall in to the water.

6. A child may jump or fall in to the water without the floats on and panic. This has happened many times as silly as it may sound. A child was playing in the water with floatation devices for a couple of hours. Mom brought out lunch and the child removes the floatation devices to eat. After lunch, another child yelled “Last one in is a rotten egg.” The child rises to the challenge and runs and jumps in the pool, forgetting the floatation devices. She panics and, luckily, gets pulled from the pool. If help had not been available the child would probably panic and drown.

7. Floatation devices can also come off in the middle of the water or deflate. This could easily end in a drowning disaster. A mother with manicured nails was playing with her 2 year old son who was wearing a float ring in the deep area of a pool. She was a marginal swimmer. Her nails pierced the ring and it deflated immediately. The child grabbed her around the neck. Luckily, a lifeguard was alert and rescued them.

8. Children lose confidence in themselves and become dependent on the floatation devices. They become afraid to try to swim. Usually, children make progress each lesson. Scotty (age 5) had swam 25 feet across my pool on one occasion on lesson 2 of his Advanced Beginner Class. He had been in my program since he was 1 year old. I

really wanted him to be successful. On lessons 3 and 4 he was very fearful and would not attempt to swim even just half the distance. I was perplexed. I often lecture the parents of the bad judgment of wearing floatation devices. After class I went to the mother to inquire and find the problem. Mom answered rather demonstrably, "We went camping. I wasn't going to let him swim in the lake without that life jacket!" He would have been much better off going on a hike and not going in the lake.

9. Children wearing floatation devices develop movement thru the water by pushing their feet flat against the water. To swim three of the four competitive strokes the foot must be extended (pointed). The foot flat push makes learning the proper and efficient extended position very difficult. The more hours in floats, the more difficult it is to break the habit.

10. Socially the child will feel inadequate and may be ostracized by his/her peers if he/she is seen wearing floatation devices. Peer pressure is a great part of developing personality. A child depending on floats in the water can quickly be a target of other children's unkind comments as to maturity and physical abilities.

We recommend getting adjusted to the water and learning to like it. Practice in the bathtub. Get the children to love water in their face. If they say "I hate water in my face." You reply, "You love water on your face. Everybody does. You just do not know it yet." A lot of children and adults have a deep fear of the water that can be easily overcome with just learning that water can be fun instead of just a scary situation. When a child jumps into the water let their head go under and get to the position where the child learns to swim up to the surface by themselves.

Always have the child be doing something to stay afloat. Maintain the child's instinct to move the arms and legs while in the water. Don't let the floatation device keep them totally afloat. Use a TRAINING KICKBOARD that will let them realize they must kick their feet to move thru the water. They learn to stay horizontal and keep their chin in the water to keep themselves afloat.

Try to get in the swimming position (horizontal) as often as possible. If using floatation devices a play board is recommended so the person is still horizontal and can kick their feet at the same time.

Start swimming lessons as early as possible. Get a professional program with professional instructors. If in the water as babies they are less likely to have a fear of it growing up. Beginner classes usually start at around age three, but each class is adjusted to ability. Support the learning at home with bath tub and dry land practice as well as giving appropriate praise for effort during class.

The benefits are much greater than just water ability when you consider a lifetime of exercise and a feeling of self worth that comes from confidence of knowing how to swim.