



newtosailing



PHOTO PAUL WYETH*

Get your **kids** sailing

Are your kids clamouring to go racing, or terrified by the idea of being trapped on a boat with mum or dad? **Rupert Holmes** looks at how to start children sailing, without risking putting them off!

Most children love to race, providing they've been introduced to the sport in the right fashion. Some take to it immediately and very quickly become unstoppable, revelling in the challenges and adrenaline of strong wind days. On the other hand, even quite timid children can appreciate the feel-good factor that arises from learning a new skill and doing it well, providing they are introduced in a manner which takes account of any anxieties they have.

A key attraction of sailing for many families is that it's an activity in which the whole family can

take part. Even if the majority of dinghy sailing is done with each member of the family in a different boat, big boat racing is possible with older children. Learning to sail makes a great family holiday in itself, whether in the UK, or as is increasingly popular, somewhere in the sun.

There's an endless variety of possibilities for getting children started in sailing, with clubs, local authorities, schools, outdoor centres and specialist sailing schools throughout the country offering courses tailored for young people. Location is no barrier to learning to sail, even if you live miles from the sea you'll have an inland club nearby – almost every county has a wide choice, from small, low-budget and family-focussed operations to the big names with top-level facilities and expansive waters.

When to start

'The best age to start varies from individual to individual,' says John Thorn, the RYA's national sailing coach. 'The key thing is if they're interested it's probably time to let them do it, but don't push them if they're not interested. Parents have to be very careful that they don't put their children off – the biggest challenge is to let each child develop

at his or her own pace, without pushing too hard.' It often pays to wait until the warmer months before you give their first learn to sail session – trying in March when it's cold, wet and windy may be counter-productive.

'The youngest is probably around six to seven, although eight can be quite young because at some point they're going to get cold and wet,' says Thorn. 'But it's not the same for everyone, some don't take to it until they're 12, or even in their early teens. Some of our best sailors didn't start until this age. Getting friends involved is a secret as well – kids like to be around their friends and they learn to sail at the same time it gives them something to share.'

Sailing takes place in a potentially very hazardous environment, so it's vital to ensure that safety standards are maintained at all times. Both the RYA and individual centres foster a culture of creating a very safe environment, and RYA-recognised centres are inspected annually. This attitude contributes enormously to making sailing statistically a relatively safe sport, with fewer injuries than many others – even football has its share of broken legs and injuries.

Another priority according to Thorn is to, 'Make it enjoyable! It's probably best not to do it yourself – teaching any of your family to drive is a potentially rocky road, whether it's your wife, husband, son or daughter, and exactly the same

Getting started

What if I can't swim?

Everyone who sails has to wear a buoyancy aid, which will help you swim and stay afloat if you fall in. It's also helpful if you can swim, but it's more important that you're confident in the water. The club or centre at which you take your course will lend you a buoyancy aid, and a wetsuit as well if you need one.

What happens the first time?

On your first sailing course you'll normally sail a small boat by yourself, or with a friend, with an instructor nearby. The instructors make everything easy to understand, show you what to do before you start, and tell you everything you need to know while you're afloat.

How wet will I get?

If the wind is light and you're in a

larger and stable boat you may only get a few splashes. However, if it's windy, or you're on a smaller boat that's close to the water, you'll probably get quite wet. This is when a wetsuit is a good choice as it helps to keep you warm even when you're soaking wet. In any case you'll need warm clothes, a pair of old trainers and a waterproof coat – it's always colder on the water than on the shore.

Will the boat turn over?

There's a chance that the boat will be blown over by a strong wind and capsize, but for your first few times the instructor will do everything he or she can to make sure the boat stays the right way up. Eventually you'll fall in and get wet – when you do, just remember to hold on to the boat. Pretty soon you'll be jumping in for the fun of it!

“ Teaching any of your family to drive is a rocky road, and it's the same learning to sail ”

principle applies to learning to sail. Hand them over to an RYA centre, whether it's in this country or overseas – there are lots of great enthusiastic instructors, who make it fun and won't push them.'

The big overseas centres account for a lot of learning to sail activity. They offer oceans of fun, in a laid-back atmosphere and most are very well geared up for catering for the diverse needs of all family members. On the whole they tend to run versions of the RYA's basic beginners' courses, and at the end of the week there's a presentation when people get certificates and prizes. In addition, they can be a good way of introducing children who are not naturally competitive to racing, through fun end-of-week regattas.

Keep the momentum going

Relatively few people who are introduced to sailing outside a club environment continue with the sport after they finish their courses, so don't neglect to check out the opportunities near home for racing and further tuition after your holiday. This is a great shame as many kids rate their sailing course as one of their best-ever experiences, and learning to sail takes lots of small incremental steps that can only be consolidated through regular practice and time spent on the water.

'Joining a club is of paramount importance,' says Thorn. 'That's where it all happens. The

strong and successful club structure is one of the great strengths of the sport in the UK – we're always trying to say to people that the best way to get better is to buy a boat and join a club, or even to join a club that has boats you can use.'

This stage – getting a child into the club environment and really building confidence there – does require participation from parents, who can help out in a number of ways, according to their expertise and temperament. 'Our kids started in a Mirror, and progressed to a Pico and a Feva, which they've still got and they love it,' says Thorn. 'We bought a Mirror to start with because I could get in with them – to help them build up their experience and confidence. Then eventually you say "Well, you're okay now, do it without me."'

Course structure

The RYA's Youth Sailing Scheme has four initial stages, each of which is a two-day session.

The first two stages focus on the minimum knowledge needed to get afloat under supervision. Youth Stage 3 covers the basic skills that form the grounding of becoming a competent sailor in light winds, while Stage 4 is an additional course to give those who have trained in single-handed boats the opportunity to sail a crewed dinghy.

The courses may be taught in a variety of boats, although most children are taught in small singlehanders, some larger crewed dinghies in which

Right A good teaching centre will provide all the necessary kit – helmets are not compulsory but are a good idea for young novices.



PHOTO RICHARD LANGDON/OCEAN IMAGES

Below Sailing is a sport the whole family can enjoy, but children will probably prefer sailing with a friend rather than a parent.

up to three or four students sail with an instructor in the boat are used by some training centres. Make sure the boat used for tuition fits the child well – if it's too big it can be scary and unmanageable. This is rarely an issue for older children, but may well be a consideration for the youngest.

After completing Stage 4 there are five more advanced course options, in the same vein as for the adult National Sailing Scheme – Sailing with Spinnakers, Start Racing and Performance Sailing

Further information:

RYA: www.rya.org.uk
OnBoard: www.ruob.co.uk
Ireland: www.sailing.ie

Get onboard

The RYA's OB (OnBoard) initiative is a funky new programme to help introduce young people to sailing and windsurfing, whatever their needs and ability. Over the next 10 years, the scheme will work with clubs throughout the UK to get half a million people into these sports. www.ruob.co.uk



PHOTO SASHA LEAN-VERCOE/YS*

are clearly of considerable benefit to anyone wanting to build their racing skills. The two other options are Seamanship Skills and Day Sailing.

Starting to race

The timing of when it's best to move onto racing will vary for each individual. Some are very keen to get racing as soon as possible, whereas others may want to spend some time just pottering around, having fun before starting to race. Each child will provide cues as to how quickly they want to develop their skills – some kids loved to be pushed, while others are happier to progress at their own pace, and may be put off if they are pressed to move too fast. If your child is hesitant, find out why and try to allay their concerns. In a competitive club it can be quite daunting to pitch yourself against others who've been racing for some time, knowing full well that you're likely be at the back of the fleet. Again it can help if a couple or group of friends start racing together, or a fun race at an end of holiday regatta may be enough to take away some anxiety. Alternatively, crewing for a more experienced child can be an excellent way forward.

The RYA's racing department works hand in hand with the training division, and plays a role in coaching some of the more advanced elements of the Youth Sailing Scheme. The racing department also looks at spotting and developing talent through its high performance programme. This identifies youngsters with potential in clubs and offers them a comprehensive training and coaching programme. ■