

A Parents Guide To The First Day of Opti Sailing

TIPS FOR HARBOR MICE PARENTS

In preparing your child for their first days in the program, let them know what to expect from the experience and how the time will be structured. Remind them of the instructor's names and the plan for the day. Knowing the game plan and the players helps to reduce natural anxiety involved in entering into new situations.

Allow them to be nervous, worried, or downright scared. Instead of responding to these reactions as silly or immature, validate their fears about getting out on the water. Let them know that first experiences on the water can be a little scary, yet you have confidence that they can get through that normal anxiety, just as you, or their cousin/friend/neighbor did.

Offer reassurance regarding the number of people there to help them, and let them know they are expected to need help, as all novices in any sport do. Balance this with comments about how fun or funny it can be when various events occur. If you have been a sailor, share some of your minor mishaps, emphasizing that everything worked out OK and that you learned something in the process (even if it was only that the harbor water didn't taste so good).

Inject humor wherever possible. Show them how to laugh at themselves and demonstrate it for them by laughing at your own foibles. You need to convey that "messing up" is routine in this venture and that you take it in stride when mess-ups occur.

While most parents would love to see their child skipper an America's Cup winner, do not focus on winning as the end goal of learning to sail. Instead, talk about the fun involved, the friendships, the associated travel, the feeling of mastery that comes from being "captain of your own ship", the excitement, and even the neat gear you get to have. Try to think realistically about your child and what is most likely to appeal to them about the sport, and then emphasize that.

Do not push, as the natural tendency for one being pushed is to push back or break away. Be sure not to make sailing days so mandatory that most other social opportunities must be missed in order to participate. This may lead to unnecessarily negative attitude toward sailing in general.

While kids are on the water, convey confidence in their ability to handle what comes and enjoyment in watching them learn. Never criticize or make jokes at their expense, especially in front of other participants or parents. Focus on how involved they are in the learning process, not just whether or not they master a skill or go the fastest. (For example, "You're really hanging in there trying to get that jibe figured out. I'm really proud to see that kind of determination.") Try not to compare your child to others, just focus on them individually. If they quit one day, let them know that some days are like that, but it does not mean that the next one will be one of those days. In my opinion, it is reasonable to use rewards (OK, call it bribery) to help kids get over a hump or to get them to conquer a fear. Offer to get them that new Nintendo tape if they will at least do whatever (Attend eight sessions; flip the boat over, etc.). Save this for the real important stuff or you will wind up being the one getting manipulated (and broke).

After sailing sessions, spend most recap time talking about the positive and fun things you observed. If they complain about it being too hard, boring, or scary, do not try to convince them otherwise. You will be wasting your breath. Instead, help them figure out what might make it better next session. Offer to talk with the coach about how to make it work better for him/her. Perhaps share a similar feeling you had about something you experienced as a child that turned out well in the end. Let them know that their feelings may change, but that if sailing continues to be no fun for them, you will consider letting them stop. Avoid making any promises you do not want to follow through on though; they will hold you to them. Using what you know about what motivates your child, encourage them to hang in there long enough to give sailing a fair try. Point out that sailing is a complex skill that takes time to master, but that once mastered, is a skill they can use for the rest of their lives.

As a parent, be sure you enjoy the time spent with the sailing program. Communicate any suggestions and feedback to the coaches promptly; yet recognize that they will not always be able to act on your input.

Express support of the program to your child so that they will feel secure and positive about what it has to offer them. Keep in Mind that sailing is meant to be one social activity of many in their lives, not their ticket to a college scholarship. By keeping pressure to succeed out of it, youngsters are most likely to reap the vast benefits that sailing has to offer them.

Happy Sailing, Leslie C. Higgins, Psy. D

The foregoing was written by Southern Yacht Club member Leslie C. Higgins, Psy. D. for the S.Y.C. Harbor Mice parents. Leslie is a mother, a practicing clinical psychologist and a sailor.

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