

healthykids

Paddle-Happy

Stand Up Paddleboards Spell Family Fun

by Laressa Nelson



photos courtesy of SURFIT USA (SURFITUSA.com)

“Most kids growing up in Chattanooga have crossed the Tennessee River via the Walnut Street pedestrian bridge; far fewer have been on the river beneath it,” remarks Mark Baldwin, owner of area paddle sports outfitter L2 Boards. Using stand up paddleboards (SUP), he loves guiding adults and children on their own up-close discoveries of the river’s cliffs, caves, fish, turtles and birds.

Waterways are enchanting at any age, and SUP recreation naturally tends to inspire creative quests. Its physical and developmental benefits are a bonus. “The stand up paddleboard is the bicycle of the water. Because paddleboarding can be done at any age and fitness level, the whole family can enjoy it together,” says Kristin Thomas, a mother of three in Laguna Beach, California, SUP race champion and executive director of the Stand Up Paddle Industry Association.

“Children are fascinated by the play of the water and the motion of the board. Parents can acclimate an infant to flat-water paddling by simply creating a well of towels onboard, with the baby snuggled between the

feet, looking up at them,” advises Lili Colby, owner of MTI Adventurewear, near Boston, Massachusetts, which makes life jackets for paddle sports. She notes that U.S. Coast Guard law requires that children 30 pounds and under wear infant life jackets to provide special head and neck support that turns a baby’s face up with an open airway within three seconds of entering the water.

It’s a good idea to first practice paddling short distances in shallow waters near the shore. Toddlers are more likely to lean overboard to play in the water, Colby cautions, so engaging in nature-inspired games along the way will help occupy them onboard.

“Young children introduced to water sports in the context of positive family interaction typically become eager to paddle on their own,” observes Tina Fetten, owner of Southern Tier Stand Up Paddle Corp., who leads a variety of SUP experiences throughout New York and northern Pennsylvania. “If they are strong swimmers, I bring them on a large board with me and teach them the skills for independent paddling.”

Although SUP boards look like

surfboards, stand up paddling is commonly taught on flat water, making it easier and more stable than surfing. Still, swimming competence and adult supervision are prerequisites to independent paddling according to paramedic Bob Pratt, co-founder of the Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project, which leads water safety classes in Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin.

“Parents should outfit all children with a life jacket, Coast Guard-approved for their age and weight, as well as a leash, which attaches to their ankle and the board with Velcro straps,” Pratt says. “If children fall into the water, a tug of the leash enables them to quickly retrieve their largest floatation device, the board.”

Experts agree that success is relatively easy, so children build confidence quickly. The sport can be adapted to suit individual needs and positions, including moving from standing to sitting or kneeling, says Fetten, who teaches adaptive SUP lessons in a community pool. As she sees firsthand, “All children, especially those with disabilities, benefit from the empowering feeling of attaining independent success.”

“A water-based sport is the healthiest outlet children can have,” attests Wesley Stewart, founder of Urban Surf 4 Kids, a San Diego nonprofit that offers free SUP and surf clinics for foster children. “Being on the water requires kids to focus on what they’re doing and has the ability to clear their minds and give them freedom. It’s like meditation. Plus, SUP is a low-impact, cross-training cardio activity; it works every part of the body.”

Beyond the basic benefits, SUP keeps children engaged by offering endless opportunities to explore the geographic and ecological diversity of different types of waterways. SUP activities and levels can grow along with children; teens can try yoga on water, competitive racing and the advanced challenges of surfing. Fitness is a bonus to the rewarding ability to propel one’s self through the water.

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