

## **Encouraging Your Sailor: Encouragement Makes It Fun; Pressure Is A Big Turnoff**

Many youth sailors are being, pushed hard - sometimes too hard. For parents and instructors, it is essential to carefully balance sailing opportunities with coaching. If you put too much pressure on kids, burnout or rejection can easily replace enthusiasm for learning.

Look at the example often found in Little League baseball, where parents try to relive, their own early days vicariously through their children. It is impossible to push kids faster than their own pace. To nudge children into sailing, I have found, is a fascinating challenge and must be done with care.

At a recent Optimist dinghy regatta in Annapolis, 104 boats competed. I counted 63 coach boats following the fleet. Around the docks you could sense the pressure placed on many of the young sailors.

The quality of sailing instruction has improved dramatically, thanks to standardized teaching methods and common boats.

Uniform boat design and sailing technique allow for measurable progress, but as skills improve and natural ability emerges, the pressure to excel builds.

I only had to look as far as my own family. Our oldest daughter, Kristi, first took Optimist sailing lessons at the San Diego YC at age 7. Looking back, it was a mistake to start her so young. Because her dad was an active sailor, Kristi perceived that everyone instantly expected her to excel. Within two years, Opti sailing gave way to a variety of worthy activities. Sadly, for me at least, sailing was not one of them.

Hoping to learn from experience, Kristi's younger twin sisters, Ashleigh and Brooke, were taken day-sailing occasionally on a 28' Herreshoff sloop and spent a few weeks each summer cruising on a schooner. But there was no talk of Opti sailing, let alone racing.

To understand how kids feel, think back to your earliest sailing days. My fears included heeling, capsizing and getting stuck in irons. It is hard for kids to overcome early fright and parents must be patient. The best way to lead is by example. Your attitude has a major impact on impressionable minds. It helps when sailing is not an end unto itself. Small doses (an hour or two at a time), are better than long days on the water. Include lots of activities around the boat.

I find that kids, like adults, enjoy sailing best when given a purposeful job. Steering with little or no coaching should be used as a major reward. Go easy when introducing racing. Explain that the difference between winning and losing is not that important. The true priority should be learning. It helps to demonstrate that most champions experience many defeats before achieving success.

For young sailors, expert coaching can be helpful. I think it is better for an outside instructor to work with children, rather than parents trying to do the job themselves. In competition, sailors need guidance and encouragement. The best way to coach is often by asking questions after a race or a practice session. Learning should be fun. Making one point at a time is better in the long term.

Emphasize restraint when winning. The antics of many professional players after plays are a disgrace. Teach young sailors to show respect for their competitors. Many of the most valuable lessons are learned by talking with rivals. North Sails President Tom Whidden and I have spent many years racing against each other on different boats, but always find time to compare notes after a regatta. In the long run we both are stronger.

The desire to learn and compete must come from within. Providing kids with reasons to learn should be your goal. Show kids what their future can be in sailing. Let them sail boats of all sizes. Get kids involved in decision making. Don't always race. Kids love games. Let older junior sailors set the pace.

For me, it will take discipline to let Ashleigh and Brooke set their own pace. But good things may happen. Wisdom varies on the best age to get kids on the water by themselves. For Kristi, 7 was too early. For the twins, 9 was about right. And for me, patience pays.

By Gary Jobson, courtesy of [Yachting Magazine](#)