

Keeping Kids Engaged During the Off-Season

THE NAUTICAL MOM



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Our passion is sailing with our two children, Gigi (8) and Jason (5). We've enjoyed extended cruises aboard our Catalina 36 Precipice every summer since even before they were born. As a matter of fact, Gigi experienced her first overnight at only two weeks old! Thanks to our affiliations with Catalina Fleet 5 and North Shore Yacht Club in Port Washington, NY, over the years we've built our endurance to the point where last summer we spent ten weeks on the boat. We'd like to believe that the kids are as enamored with cruising as we are, and during the summer that holds true, but keeping them engaged and interested during the winter months is a challenge. We use this time to focus on exercises to increase their confidence and comfort during the height of the season.

One approach we've taken has been to ask ourselves what we're doing to maintain the boat and what role the children can play in this maintenance. There are endless opportunities to spend leisurely hours explaining the systems of the boat without the rocking or panicked sense of urgency that may accompany a repair underway. We find that thoroughly understanding the way the boat works from the inside out and the bottom up is tremendously reassuring for them. For example, when the seas are rough, we encourage them to visualize the keel and rudder and imagine how they are working under the water to stabilize the boat. Or, when the fresh water intake gets clogged with seaweed and the engine starts to overheat, they don't panic. While mom and dad are desperately groping at a mooring in the swift Nantucket current, they can clearly visualize and understand the problem and work side by side with us to resolve it. Jason was quick to suggest pipe cleaners from his art kit to clear the seacock and thru hull. It worked, and we were back under way before colliding with the ferries and other marine traffic in this busy harbor.

A less technical, but equally important winter project is for the kids to clean out their storage areas and update their boat toys. Each child has one bin for toys and a shelf for books. They share a closet for foul weather gear and other clothes. Since children grow rapidly and their tastes change frequently, it's imperative that they purge their space regularly. Just last week, we found candy wrappers in their raincoat pockets from the July 4th Parade in Edgartown, MA. The smell brings back the sights and sounds of that marvelous event and our days on the Vineyard. An ideal time to restock toys is just after the New Year. While they are engrossed in a bounty of holiday gifts, they become ready to rotate out some of their older toys. We secretly abscond with the best of the otherwise discarded toys to the boat. In five months, it's like a whole new round of holidays as they rediscover old favorites. We like to make up stories about how the stuffed animals were eager to set sail after hearing us talk about our trips and consequently became stowaways.

One of the biggest factors contributing to our onboard success is to allow for enough activities on shore to offset some of the perhaps tedious hours underway. Given that we want more out of our travels than endless hours at the playgrounds, movies and ice cream parlors, we strive to make the trip educational. So, on a snowy night around the fire we pull out the charts, and the cruising guides to plan our next adventure. There are so many excellent guides and Internet resources to explain what sightseeing is available at each location. We pick destinations that reinforce their scholastic curriculum.

In elementary school, their Social Studies courses focus on American History. As we've discovered over the years, New England is a treasure trove of historical sites. We've used sailing to reinforce their understanding of early settlers' lifestyles and relationships with Native Americans. We learned that the Popham Colony on the Kennebec River in Maine was actually founded in 1607, the same year as the Jamestown, VA settlement. Gigi and Jason know how strong the currents run in Maine, and how fiercely cold the winters are, and the difference in indigenous natural resources, so we spent hours imagining the challenges facing these northern pioneers compared to those of the more temperate settlements. Needless to say, the Pophams barely lasted three years before retreating to England, but in the process built the first boat ever constructed in Maine, the 50-foot Virginia.



Gigi and Jason hang out with the locals in Salem, MA. © The Nautical Mom

Since New England sailing destinations strongly influenced our national culture, it's easy to link our proposed sailing destinations with everyday activities year round. While Gigi planned her witch costume for Halloween, we investigated the Witch Trials in Salem, MA and discovered the appeal of that port. It was also good tie-in for Jason since he was dressing as a pirate: there's a very good pirate museum in Salem! Based on this research, he decided to be "Billy the Kidd," rather than just any anonymous pirate and has requested that our summer plans provide opportunities to seek Kidd's treasure in the islands. Salem is also home to Nathaniel Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables, which actually coincided nicely with Gigi's study of early architecture – imagine an 8-year-old who knew what a gable was and then had perfect opportunity to count them on this famous structure.

These examples may serve as specific and purposeful ideas for families new to sailing or grandparents eager to engage grandkids. For us, and other veteran cruisers, sailing is an integral component of our lives; it's very natural to connect our daily experiences to life on the boat. Whatever the stage or the age, I believe the key to engaging kids is imagination...Make creative connections to sailing life as often as possible and remember there are so many different dimensions of the sport that may be relevant to them. ♦

The Nautical Mom and her family live in New York City. She is working on a book about taking children cruising. Look for more of her articles in upcoming issues.