

# Recreation and Life Jackets: A win-win for everyone

In a school gymnasium surrounded by several hundred kindergarteners and first graders, Corps of Engineers Park Ranger David Quebedeaux – or “Ranger Dave” as the kids call him – taught a priceless lesson: Always wear your life jacket.

Using interactive props like goggles, hats, gloves and life jackets, Quebedeaux, a member of the J. Strom Thurmond Lake Project office, gave a water safety presentation at Maxwell Elementary School in Thomson, Ga., on May 6.

The presentation was one of many for Quebedeaux, who, like other park rangers within the Savannah



David Quebedeaux, park ranger at J. Strom Thurmond Dam and Lake, teaches children at Maxwell Elementary School to always wear their life jacket when they are in, on or near water. *Photo by Tracy Robillard.*



“Ranger Dave” uses interactive props like hats, gloves, goggles and life jackets to teach children about water safety. *Photo by Tracy Robillard.*

district, incorporates water safety programs into their weekly schedules.

“Bringing them water safety is a very fun and important activity that the Corps of Engineers can do,” he said. “We’re reaching kids and families who live in a lake environment. Lake Thurmond is the largest man-made lake east of the Mississippi River. The people living around it want to come out and play, but we as rangers want them to be safe.”

“I see these kids – they come out to the lake and say ‘Hey Ranger Dave! You came to my school.’ It makes you feel pretty good,” he said.

Quebedeaux chooses four volunteers to sit in chairs and pretend to ride in a boat. He gives them blacked-out goggles to simulate boating at night, gloves to simulate boating in the cold, and wacky hats to simulate a party boat. Then, the children each get a life jacket and are asked to put it on in 30 seconds while wearing all the props.

But some of Ranger Dave’s life jackets are purposely altered. Some are falling apart, some have unconventional designs, and some are too small for the children.

After an energetic countdown that echoes throughout the gymnasium, and of course, much noise and laughter, the children (none of whom can put it on in 30 seconds) learn an important lesson about life jackets.

“My program is based on education and fun. If it’s not fun, they won’t learn anything,” Quebedeaux said. “So we got some life jackets and crazy hats and other props to get them involved. But then they find out some of the life jackets don’t fit, some are torn up, some of them are unusual and the kids don’t know how they work. So we drive home the point that you need to find a life jacket that fits before getting into the boat, you need to make sure it’s on properly, and that it’s in good condition.”

## “Wear It”

Everyone on a boat or near the water should wear a U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket, whether you think



you’re a good swimmer or not. Don’t leave land without it. EVERYONE should ALWAYS wear a life jacket when in, or around water. Make sure your life jacket fits properly and is in good condition before getting on the boat. Those driving the

watercraft should always wear a lanyard attached to the ignition's kill switch.

## Know your boat

Know your boat and know the rules of the road. Operator errors account for 70 percent of boating accidents, according to the U.S. Coast Guard. Take a boating safety class and familiarize yourself with the federal and state regulations governing boating. Find more at [www.uscgboating.org](http://www.uscgboating.org)

## Think twice about alcohol

Alcohol is involved in up to half of all water-related deaths. Statistics show that one half of all adolescent male drownings are tied to alcohol use. Make sure the captain or person handling the boat is experienced and competent. Because there are no road signs or lane markers on the water, and the weather can be unpredictable, it's important to be able to think quickly and react well under pressure. If you're drinking alcohol, this is impossible.

## Beware of fatigue

The Coast Guard warns people about a condition called boater's fatigue, which means that the wind, noise, heat, and vibration of the boat all combine to wear you down when you're on the water. Be aware of this risk factor and take breaks when you feel fatigued. Be sure to drink plenty of water to help stay hydrated.

Erin Parnell, park ranger at Richard B. Russell Dam and Lake, helps children try on life jackets during a water safety program at the Corps' 23rd Annual Kid's Fishing Day. *Photo by Tracy Robillard.*



Tanya Grant, park ranger at Hartwell Dam and Lake, encourages visitors to always wear life jackets while swimming or boating. If they don't have their own life jacket, visitors can borrow one through the Corps' Life Jacket Loaner Program. *Photo by J. Weaver.*

## Know your surroundings

Be knowledgeable of the water environment you are in and its potential hazards, such as deep and shallow areas, currents, depth changes, obstructions and where the entry and exit points are located. The more informed you and your family are, the less likely you are to be injured or killed.

## Feet first

Always use a feet-first water entry. Head and neck injuries and resulting fatalities occur far more often from "diving" in head first.

## Never swim alone

Always swim with a partner. Even experienced swimmers can become tired or get muscle cramps, which might make it difficult to get out of the water. Swimming in an open body of water (such as a river, lake, or ocean) is different from swimming in a pool because it requires more energy to handle the currents and other conditions. When people swim together, they can help each other or go for help in case of an emergency.

## Learn more

Children and their parents can learn more about water safety with Bobber the Water Safety Dog, an interactive mascot for the Corps of Engineers National Water Safety Program. Check it out online at: <http://watersafety.usace.army.mil>



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