

LIFE AFLOAT WITH A BABY

by SUE BEAUMONT

If, like us, you never have anything completed in time, the problems start when these innocent little monsters become mobile. By the time Angus moved into his own childproof cabin, he had completely demolished one end of his carrycot by climbing in and out regardless of barriers, had stayed awake all evening rampaging round the saloon, and the only place Dick and I were fit for was the mental home. So—plan ahead!

We had enough room to make him a small cabin with a locker, and a full-size quarter berth low enough for falls to be inconsequential. If you haven't that much room, you will need to fix either bunk-boards, or slats to the open side of the bunk.

Padding the bunk sides

If you have a mountaineering offspring, strong netting fixed to the bunk under the mattress with loops to attach it quickly up to the deck head is the only answer. The mesh should be large enough for small fingers not to get caught, but not so large that a small head may be forced through. The baby must not wear any buttons near the neck as these could get caught in the mesh and cause strangulation.

If you are serious sailors it might be an idea to use padding around the sides and ends of the bunk. This can be made with foam, covered in wipe clean material, and will prevent any damage to baby—not to mention your boat.

After about the age of one it is not necessary to boil drinking water from the mains supply, but bearing in mind that the water in your tanks could have been lying there for several days—or even weeks, it is a sensible precaution to boil it for young children. The same is true, of course, for any water out of a carrier.

Tinned baby food is very useful but if you have a portable liquidiser, it saves an extra gas ring for heating up baby's special food. I have a Tower Power mixer which can be charged up at home from a

240 volt electricity supply and used a number of times away from its charging base before it needs to be plugged in again. Not only is it useful for preparing baby food, but a boon to make yesterday's stew into today's soup.

Angus is now an expert climber. Above decks life jacket, life lines and strict discipline are a must. Before I've taken a few paces he could be overboard without my noticing. You may be lucky enough to have a child who doesn't object to being trussed up and tied on.

We're not so lucky.

Angus doesn't make too much fuss about the life jacket, but the minute he realises that he's tied on to anything his screams can be heard for the length of the Medway. I think we slipped up by not trying this out sooner, so I hope



that you may learn from our mistakes. Rather let the child scream than take the easy way out. We have heard so many stories of children falling from boats and drowning in quiet waters because simple precautions were not observed.

Several years ago Dick rescued a small child from the upper Thames who had fallen off the stern of a hire cruiser. He caught up with this boat at the next lock and asked the occupants if they had lost anything—they didn't think they had! When it eventually dawned on them what had happened they proceeded to scold the child for playing on deck, and were

unable to see that they were in any way to blame. The rest of their holiday was made miserable for them by Thames Conservancy staff who heard about the incident. It could have been considerably more unhappy for them had Dick not been astern of them at the right time.

Children of boat owners soon become used to safety precautions and restrictions and take them for granted. Visiting children are another matter. We are very strict with them. If a child won't wear a life jacket on deck it is either left behind or confined inboard of our cabin cruiser. If ours was a sailing boat the rules would be even more rigid.

The importance of swimming . . .

Children going to the other extreme can be a problem too. When we had explained to a visiting four year old why she should wear a life jacket she seemed rather too keen to put it on. If we hadn't made a grab at her when it was donned, she would have been over the side to test it. Her sentiments were splendid—but in January . . . ?

In dinghies our general rule is one adult to see to the boat plus one adult per non-swimming child, though this is not always possible. Still, in any boat there should always be one person to control the craft and one to watch any children.

I was rather nervous of teaching Angus to swim in case I went about it the wrong way. But I then discovered that no-one was interested in teaching a child under three. So it now becomes a necessity. Living on board, we don't want Angus to have to wear a life jacket in harbour if there is an alternative. So it will be swimming lessons from me and a waterproof whistle always round his neck to summon help, should he need it. Though it will be some time before he becomes proficient enough to reach this stage.

Even if your child never swims the channel he will have the necessary confidence to stop him from the panic which is the cause of many drownings.

So often I hear of people who give up their boating because a baby arrives. Sometimes it is for financial reasons, but more often they feel that young children have no place on a boat. What a pity to miss out on such an enjoyable pastime when with a little care and thought the whole family could be enjoying it. ●