

## Cut the jargon

**Suzie Blair** is the Development Officer for Sailing in the City – a project in Scotland designed to bring dinghy sailing to as many children as possible. Through this work she has gained tremendous experience helping children get the most from their time on the water, no matter how short that time is. Here she shares the importance of avoiding technical terminology until the time is right, and a few suggestions for how to introduce it.

*"Luff up just a little, sheet in, tighten your kicking strap and where should your dagger board be?"*

You know what I'm talking about, but would a beginner? As qualified instructors, technical terms are second nature, but your students won't be impressed. Children in particular often switch off the moment you start using this strange new language. However, we do need to teach some technical terminology, but only basic terms at the right time and in the best way.

Through experiences with Sailing in the City (SITC) it has become obvious to me that children are definitely not mini adults - they're more like mini sponges. The majority have a fantastic ability to absorb lots of information in a short space of time, provided it's presented appropriately. Each 'mini sponge' has their own way of absorbing but they generally share one goal - having fun!

### Introduce – play – chat

Children's attention spans tend to be short so we try to ensure their interest is constantly stimulated. We have adapted the 'Brief – task – de-brief' model to:

#### 'Introduce – play – chat'

The principles are the same but it's

delivered in a more child friendly manner. In SITC we find the best way to teach children is through the use of appropriately timed, focused and enjoyable games. For example:

*Briefly introduce the sailors to the boat. Show them where and how to sit and what the two jobs are: steering (moving the blue stick) and paddling (pulling the red thing through the water).*

*Play afloat. Set the sailors a challenge of introducing themselves to all the orange balls (buoys with faces). Assist those who need extra support with simple tips to help them complete the challenge.*

*Chat about the challenge ashore. With some guided questions encourage them to tell you how to steer and the best way to paddle. Armed with these new skills, progress on to calling the blue stick the 'tiller extension' and the red thing the 'paddle'. Gradually build up the terminology as they learn to sail.*

### Introduce

At this early stage we find it best to keep talking to the absolute minimum. Keep it short and simple – only tell your students what they really need to know before going afloat. Be enthusiastic, use clear demonstrations and get them involved wherever possible. During SITC taster sessions we often mention technical names briefly but always back them up with other words that students will remember. I think of this as sowing the seed for learning the correct terminology.

#### Teaching the basics of tacking onshore

*"The turn you are doing is called a tack. It's when the front of the boat crosses through the wind."* Demonstrate by pointing at the bow and tacking on land.

*"You should be able to see the big green shed all the time when turning."*

Point out the shed or other upwind landmark.

*"and your sail will flap as you turn."*

### Play

We set the sailors challenges that will enable them to practice the techniques we introduced. We use games to give them the freedom to experiment afloat, with the instructors ready to provide support and ensure they are safe. These experiential learning environments, where the students are responsible for their outcomes, should empower them to make their own decisions and learn



faster. It all goes back to: **when I hear I forget – when I see I remember – when I do I learn.**

#### Sailing a figure of eight course

Ashore, briefly go over tacking and wind direction. Then set them the challenge of putting ducks into floating paddling pools or buckets attached to two buoys. Make sure they tack at each end by getting them to 'high five' an instructor standing in the water downwind of the buoy. Don't tell them at this stage that they are sailing a figure of eight on a beam reach course, tacking at each buoy. All they need to know is that they have to distribute their ducks and race back to the shore!

### Chat

This is when we start introducing the correct terminology, as we have the opportunity to guide the students to understand what they have learnt during their play time. After chatting through the learning points, if we feel confident that they understand what was introduced, it's time to see if that seed we have sown and nurtured has started to grow! We gradually introduce the technical terms as they now have a basic understanding of the subject and an experience to relate it to. It becomes familiar and, hopefully, easier to comprehend.

We find it useful to re-demonstrate the

skill, followed by questioning to ensure they have understood the new words.

#### Run a game afloat where the children have to stop at the RIB to collect their team's ball

Back ashore chat about any problems, what worked well and who thought they were lying-to properly. It is likely that some of them got stuck in irons during the challenge, so discuss what this means and how to solve the problem. Follow this with a 'getting out of irons challenge' and some more lying-to games afloat.

The process of introduce – play – chat is then repeated for the next set of skills. Now you can use the correct sailing terms to help sow the seed for the next steps in their development. It's important to maintain focus on the original learning point and to be flexible and open to any additional progressions. Don't forget to have fun yourself while keeping your sailors' interest stimulated with games and challenges.

To conclude, we recommend that the right time to introduce technical sailing language to young sailors is generally when they have experienced the skill in question. The best way is through reflection and discussion of this experience, while introducing terminology progressively.

Enjoy watching your little sponges grow!



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