



## THE KNOWLEDGE BASE

### Do Water Wings Fly?

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**F**lotation devices have long been used by swim instructors as learn-to-swim aids and by parents seeking an additional layer of protection for their young children. These devices — kickboards, float belts, water wings, “swimmies,” rafts, noodles, inner tubes and so on — can help kids experience freedom and mobility under the watchful eye of a qualified instructor, and help nonswimmers overcome a fear of water.

During public swim time, however, these same flotation devices present obstacles for lifeguards and dangers for children. While many facilities prohibit the use of flotation devices, a reasonable, tailored flotation-device policy that balances risks against benefits and guest enjoyment is the best line of defense against crying 3-year-olds and their angry parents.

#### Reduced supervision

Why do so many facilities completely ban flotation devices? Most likely, such bans are designed to enhance safety by ensuring that guards have clear sight lines and by encouraging close parental supervision of children in the water.

For guards, inflatable devices present significant surveillance challenges. Swimmers can easily become hidden from a guard’s view in a sea of floating inner tubes. While many waterparks manage these risks by providing additional guard stations at wave pools and other attractions, increasing staff would be burdensome for most aquatics facilities.

Patrons young and old, however, love tubes and rafts. But many parents of young children let their supervision slip because they believe their children are safe when wearing flotation devices. These devices can also provide a child with a false sense of security; nonswimmers can become overconfident and venture into deep water.

Even manufacturers recognize the importance of parental supervision. Typical warnings printed on flotation devices inform parents of the need to supervise children in the water, and the warnings clearly state that flotation aids should not be used as lifesaving devices. Despite these warnings, many parents admit they don’t watch their children as closely when their children wear



While a “noodle hour” can reduce complaints, kids should never be allowed to play with safety equipment such as ring buoys.

“swimmies.”

Flotation devices also can create the following dangerous situations:

- Inflatable devices can leak and deflate, leaving nonswimmers in distress.
- Children can easily fall off or, with a strong gust of wind, be blown off inflatable rafts.
- Swimmers can easily tire while retrieving an inflatable device that has drifted into deep water or blown off shore.
- Guards can become distracted by children using flotation devices, and may focus more attention on those with flotation aids rather than on those without.

### ‘Noodle hour’

Given these circumstances, can a facility allow patrons to experience the fun of flotation devices while maintaining safety? Yes, by creating a cautious, customer-friendly written policy, or updating an existing policy. For existing policies, check to see if the policy contains the word “noodle.” If not, it may be time to update it.

Facilities should consider the following points when developing a flotation-device policy:

- Create a “Noodle Hour” — an established period, usually toward the end of the day when patron loads diminish, when children can bring their noodles into the pool. It’s a good idea to require swim tests for kids wanting to use the deep end. A special period will reduce complaints from those wanting to use flotation devices.
- Permit flotation devices only when a parent or adult guardian is within arm’s reach. One adult may supervise only two young children or nonswimmers. This will reduce the lack of parental supervision.
- To reduce the risk of obstructing a guard’s view, prohibit rafts or other large inflatables.

No matter how carefully directors have crafted their policies, they will inevitably face complaints.

At such times, directors must be understanding, but firm. Remind guests that the rules exist because some parents use flotation devices to avoid close supervision of young children. Tell guests that while you’re confident that they would watch their children, the rule exists because others don’t.

Regardless of the policy, managers and guards must enforce it clearly and consistently. Defining expectations before guests enter facilities will help reduce the number of dissatisfied customers.



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### Additional reading:

Brewster, Chris B. The United States Lifesaving Association Manual of Open Water Lifesaving. Brady/Prentice Hall, 1995.

Griffiths, Tom, Ed.D. Better Beaches. National Recreation and Park Association, 1999.

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