

Last month in this column we sorted out aspects of independent thinking and self-discipline within junior sailing. On the other end of the spectrum, as Valerie of *S/Y Alice Wragg* says, "Junior sailing teaches us how inter-dependent we are. One realizes they need the help, support and guidance of others. That we must help each other if we are to succeed, and in some cases, survive." As exhilarating as it is for a child to take the tiller and mainsheet, controlling and skillfully sailing a small boat alone, the child also learns that it is a combination of knowledge, skills and the instruction and oversight of the coach's watchful eye to which he can attribute his newfound success.

The word "sailing" doesn't conjure up positive association for many West Indians. Nautical accidents are plentiful, painful. Carriacou resident Kelly Philip, an administrator for Tyrrel Bay Yacht Haulout the first time we hauled out our boat there, lost the lower section of one leg after it was crushed between two commercial vessels. Allison Caton, director of L'Estre Junior Sailing, Carriacou, lost her father to a boating accident in 2004. With four other men, Mr. Caton was transporting building supplies from Union Island to Carriacou after dark. They didn't make it. Somewhere off Mabouya Island their vessel sank. Two men swam to Mabouya, but Mr. Caton and two others were lost. You can hardly talk to a West Indian without them being able to identify a father, uncle, brother or son who has met calamity at sea.

As we explore overcoming historical and cultural fear of the ocean, the subject turns to safety: how to establish and instill it.

In few other places is a disabled boat more dangerous to its crew than on the leeward side of the Eastern Caribbean islands. Wind and current quickly usher a disabled vessel out into the vast Caribbean Sea. Next stop: Panama.

Unlike the safe havens of enclosed bays such as Clarkes Court Bay, Grenada, many of the bays where Caribbean children are learning to sail open out into the sea. Therefore, introducing these children to the perils without squelching their enthusiasm can be a tricky business. Like other Kayaks (Carriacou residents) and, more broadly West Indians, Allison Caton knows all too well the sadness and fear related to marine vessels. As I gathered information for this piece, a pleasure craft with 12 young Grenadians aboard left northern Grenada at night to join Carnival festivities taking place in Carriacou. The boat capsized en route. Only five people have been found alive. Allison says, "So many of the boats here don't have safety gear. The lack of safety equipment is more of a problem than children sailing unescorted dinghies."

With reprint permission from Jim "Hutch" Hutchinson, let's go over bullet points gleaned from an excellent piece he wrote on unescorted sailing:

- The master safeguard is for someone ashore to know where you are going, who is with you and when you will be back. This someone needs to be one who will take prompt and effective action if you don't return.
- Passengers. Be choosy. A panicking passenger when things go wrong is a serious danger. Losing a passenger who shouldn't have been out there is hard to live with.
- Safety equipment. For every person aboard, a life jacket with whistle attached (five whistles in a row is an international emergency signal); two bailers (at least one tied or clipped to the boat); oars and rowlocks (so you can get ashore if the sailing rig breaks or the wind quits); flotation inflated and securely tied in; sailing rig, board, rudder, hull in good condition; dinghy repair kit including short lengths of 3mm cord for improvising sailing rig repairs, tying things in, etcetera.

In a waterproof bag that is lashed inside the boat: cell phone — verify you have enough credit, key numbers saved, charged battery or VHF radio fully charged; clothing offering sun protection and foul weather gear (wet and rainy means cold); shoes for emergencies where you must wade ashore through coral, sea urchins or having to walk through bush to get to a road. A flare kit.

If there is any chance of being caught out at night, a bright and reliable light in a dry bag secured to the boat. Shine it alternately at the approaching boat and on your sail.

- Risk evaluation. Establish with your sailing instructor or mentor specifics for your locale. (For example, will a disabled boat usually be blown ashore? Is there often choppy water and current to deal with? Are you passing from the sight of your shore team? Will extreme gusts create the possibility of capsizing and/or breaking gear?)
- Detect current. Know how to use "ranges": Watching a near point that is in line with a far point (a range), which shows which way you are drifting (right/left), then sailing a range perpendicular to your course to determine that component of the current (against you/with you).
- If something breaks or weather turns bad, you probably have more headwind and current than you can paddle against.
- If light wind and no paddle, lie on the bow and use your hands as paddles or unrig and use mast, boom or sprit like a kayak paddle. This may not be enough to get you to shore but could hold your position while you await rescue.
- Stay with the boat.
- Depending on the make of boat, reefs, rocky shores and collisions may be capable of wrecking your small craft. Stay clear.
- Two dinghies sailing in company. One theory is that this makes the operation safer. Another theory is that it makes the operation more risky. If one dinghy must be abandoned, can the other safely carry everyone? And, if one dinghy must tow the other (which is *much* slower and can't point as high), can they beat the wind and current and reach shore in daylight... if at all? To be of use to each other, they must stick together. I know of a six-day, 194-mile drift into the Caribbean that began when one boat started looking for another boat that was safely ashore. It was pure luck that a yacht happened to be out there, even more luck that it saw them.

Jim Hutchinson says, "While the above can be used as limitations, it can also be used as building blocks. A sailor who has proven competence, good judgment and reliability can begin to expand into the next level. The main dangers in sailing are adverse weather, equipment problems and pilot error — often in combination. The vast majority of accidents involve pilot error, which includes not checking weather and not keeping an eye on it, not having the right equipment and in good condition. One way or another, 90 percent of accidents are pilot error. You make your own luck. I taught basic flying (in the US) in moderate conditions then worked my students into more challenging situations. I taught them to recognize and fly within their limitations, but also how to expand those limitations with practice and experience."

He recommends that each sailing club or school make its rules clear and specific,

and share a detailed analysis of local features.

This Y2A challenges all youth sailing leaders to discuss this with their intermediate and higher sailors. Think about your locale. Establish specific guidelines for Unescorted Sailors especially as it pertains to your island. While we encourage youth to seize the day, to stretch their independent thinking, we need to give them the additional tools for their Toolkit, which include risk assessment and sound judgment.

With this lengthy and weighty subject we have but space to feature one person. Welcome Aiden Brisbane from St. Kitts & Nevis!

Y2A Featured Youth

*Aiden Charles Brisbane, 9 years old
Junior Sailing Program: St. Kitts Yacht Club Junior Sailing Program*

Ski is pronounced "sky" at Ski Academy School where Aiden attends Grade 4. He particularly enjoys math and sports and lives in St. Kitts with his mother, father and baby sister, Meeshka. Aiden's mother signed him up for the St. Kitts & Nevis Sailing

Association's summer sailing program. Of his first exposure to sailing, Aiden says, "It was the best three weeks ever. I love sailing because I love being on the water. The ocean is my favorite place to be. It's so peaceful and quiet."

"Sailing has helped me with life skills teaching me how to trust myself when I am alone on the water and have to

make decisions. Also, when I am sailing with a partner, it has taught me the importance of working together as we are responsible for our own safety."

Aiden likes learning in the Optimist because it is small and he can sail it by himself. Though he is not a member of St. Kitts Yacht Club, the club hosts the sailing lessons and Aiden feels welcome sailing there. One of his happiest sailing moments: "When I was by myself on the water and I finally was doing everything I was taught by Nick (Dupre). It felt good to know what I was doing." Aiden's scariest moment: "On my first day, I was excited but thought I would never be able to do it."

Coach Nicholas Dupre says, "Aiden is a pleasure to teach as he listens attentively to instructions and lights up with excitement the farther we head from shore. His peaceful manner is reflected in the natural sailing environment. I hope to keep his interest by pushing him towards the more competitive side of sailing and allowing

UNESCORTED SAILING



him and his buddies enough time to do what young boys like him want to do: adventure, in the big playground of the sea!"

At nine years old, Aiden already looks into his future, saying, "I would like to sail with the St. Kitts Yacht Club and become a professional sailor." According to his mother, "Aidan would like to sail professionally and sail around the world when he gets older. He was inspired by that movie *Maiden Trip* of the youngest girl to sail around the world alone at 14 years old."

To other Caribbean youths, Aiden says, "We can do anything we want. There are many different things in the world to do. You don't have to pick just one. Just try with an open mind and heart."

Ellen Ebert Birrell attributes her opportunity to cruise the Caribbean aboard Boldly Go with partner Jim Hutchins to life skills built in childhood. Believing swimming and sailing are essentials for island youth, she supports junior sailing and serves on the Caribbean Sailing Association Sailing Development Committee. Visit caribbean-sailing.com/youth/youth-programs for more information.

Youth2Adult - Y2A - is a series of articles celebrating sailing's role in youth development. If you know of a Caribbean youth sailor or adult candidate for featuring in Y2A, please contact ellenbirrell@gmail.com.