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## Kids Don't Float...and Their Parents Don't Either: Using a Family-Centered Approach in Alaska's Kids Don't Float Program

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## Kids Don't Float...and Their Parents Don't Either: Using a Family-Centered Approach in Alaska's Kids Don't Float Program

### Cover Page Footnote

Dedication We would like to dedicate this paper to the third author's uncle, Noel Stanislaus, who died tragically in a boating incident in 2017 in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada.

### Abstract

The goal of this experiential report is to outline the adoption of a family-centered *Kids Don't Float* approach. We conducted a critical synthesis of information to reflect the expansion of the *Kids Don't Float* program into a more family-centered approach. The critical synthesis provided insights into why we should adopt this approach, how it was implemented, and how it influenced drowning incidents compared to the previously used child-centered approach. The adoption of a family-centered approach may contribute to reducing drowning incidents by targeting parents, providing safety information to families, and promoting parental modelling of life jackets. Program evaluators and water safety advocates may use these insights to strengthen injury prevention programs that target drowning incidents.

*Keywords:* public health, drowning prevention, family health, program evaluation

*Kids Don't Float (KDF)* is a program that follows the public health approach to injury prevention and was developed to reduce the number of drowning and cold water-related injuries and fatalities experienced by children and youth in Alaska, United States (Alaska Government, n.d.a). *KDF* has two major components: an educational component and a provisional component. The educational component involves in-class and in-water educational activities and outreach efforts supported by communities throughout Alaska. The provisional component involves life jacket loaner board construction and provides the public with access to life jackets (State of Alaska, n.d.a). These loaner boards provide readily accessible life jackets in sizes infant to XXXL to the public free of charge with the understanding that the life jackets are returned to the boards after being used (Alaska Government, n.d.a). Thirty-six people have experienced a sudden cold water immersion event and survived thanks in part to the *KDF* program (State of Alaska, 2009).

The Alaska drowning rate is up to five times higher than the national average (Alaska Government, n.d.a). Adults are at risk of drowning more than children and youth. In fact, the average age of drowning victims out of 300 deaths that occurred in Alaska from 2007-2012 was 39 years (McLaughlin & Castrodale, 2014). There are multiple efforts in Alaska aimed at educating adults about water and boating safety. Courses to educate adults about boating safety are offered by the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary and the Alaska Marine Safety Education Association. The *KDF* education program in particular has started employing a family-centered approach to reduce drowning-related incidents for all ages. In this experiential report, we outline why a family-centered approach was adopted, how it is being implemented, and how it may influence drowning incidents compared to *KDF*'s previously used child-centered approach.

### **Kids Don't Float (KDF)**

*KDF* was created in 1996 through a collaboration between state, federal, and local grass-roots agencies to address child and youth drowning rates in Alaska (Alaska Government, n.d.a). The program lends life jackets through its “life jacket loaner boards” to children and adults in Alaska. As of 2015, 663 life jacket loaner sites have been established (Alaska Government, n.d.a). *KDF* staff members in the education program offer short-term in-class and in-water lessons to the public. These in-class and in-water lessons can include teaching children about cold water survival and the correct selection, fitting, and use of life jackets. Cold water survival and boating safety lessons are sometimes taught in a pool. The pool is used to simulate a real world environment where cold water and boating safety lessons may be applied. The educational program is also offered to instruct the public on how to teach both in-class and in-water cold water survival courses (Alaska Government, n.d.b). Since inception, the *KDF* education program has had 249,645 participants. The *KDF* Ambassador program provides opportunities for youth in middle and high school to learn about the *KDF* curriculum, to teach it to children in their communities, and to engage in water safety initiatives in their broader communities (Alaska Government, n.d.b).

*KDF* is informed by a public health approach to injury prevention, which uses tested preventative interventions, evidence-based scientific understanding of injury, and continual evaluation and evolution according to culture and environment to reduce the number of Alaskan child drowning incidents (Tulchinsky & Varavikova, 2010). It has increasingly shifted from a child-centered to a family-centered approach to better address the unique characteristics of drowning in Alaska.

### **Adoption of a Family-Centered Approach**

Family-centered approaches are used to reduce risk factors in a population by targeting the needs of the family and enhancing protective factors for children, adolescents, and parents using family units (Beardslee et al., 2003). Family-centered compared to child-centered approaches to drowning prevention are thus better suited to address the influence of family environments (e.g., parent-child relationships and communications) on children's, adolescents', and parents' health and well-being. This is because family-centered approaches are robust and useful in targeting problematic health behaviors, strengthening family bonds, and facilitating environments that enhance child, adolescent, and parental competencies (Spoth et al., 2002). *KDF* has increasingly taken a more family-centered approach to reduce child and adult drowning rates by promoting parental modeling of life jacket use and by providing parents and families with water and boating safety education.

The family-centered approach was adopted due to increasing awareness that children play an important role in their own survival and in the survival of others such as family members. To implement the family-centered approach, *KDF* offered many family-centered programs, including a migrant education program that began in 2012, and in-water family events (e.g., “family pool nights” and “paddle fun days”). The in-water family events were considered essential for reducing the number of drowning incidents during family boating days, as the events provided opportunities for *all* members of the family, and thus all members on the same boat, to learn boating safety strategies (Toth, 2016). To improve the likelihood that youth and adults would wear life jackets offered by *KDF*, the larger life jackets for youth and adults are marked with “*Wear it Alaska*,” instead of “*Kids Don’t Float*” so they are more appealing to an older demographic.

Through the *KDF* programs, children encouraged their parents to wear life jackets by informing their parents about the lifesaving benefits of life jackets. Children who participated in *KDF* programs were also provided with “*Pledge to Live*” cards to give to their parents. Parents were asked to fill out the card (also available online) on which they pledged to wear a life jacket when in an open boat or on a boat deck and provided a reason why they would do so (e.g., “I love my children”) (see <http://pledgetolive.org>) (Alaska Office of Boating Safety, n.d.).

### **Benefits of a Family-Centered Approach**

There has been an increased interest in *KDF* water safety programs over time, with 5,741 participants in 2002 compared to 12,846 participants in 2019. It is possible that the greater participation in water safety programs, as well as *KDF*'s adoption of a family-centered approach, are partially responsible for the decrease in drowning incidents over time in Alaska (26 incidents in 1999 compared to 11 incidents in 2019), and the increase in adult and child personal floatation device (PFD) wear rate on power boats. Specifically, for adults aged 18 years and older, PFD wear rate on power boats increased by 14.2% from the period 2001-2003 to 2015, while the wear rate for children under the age of 13 increased by 13.4% over the same time period. Thus, there may be multiple benefits to *KDF*'s engagement with children and their parents as a family unit and encouragement of parental modelling of life jackets. Parental modelling is an evidence-based protective measure that has been shown to reduce children's probability of experiencing injury while simultaneously reinforcing safety behaviors for adults. Parental modelling influences children's current and intended behaviors with children's behaviors reflecting those of their parents (Morrongiello et al., 2008). This is also true for parental modelling of personal floatation devices. Quan, Bennett, Cummings, Trusty, and Treser (1998) examined PFD use by recreational boaters in Washington and Oregon. They found that “PFD use was high (91%) in children less than 5 years, regardless of sex or type of boat. For those age 5–14 years, use was less frequent

(63%)...but if at least one older person wore a PFD, 95% of the children/youth in the same boat did so” (Quan et al., 1998, p. 204). This finding was unsurprising, as children, adolescents, *and* adults are more likely to wear life jackets if an adult models life jacket usage (Peden et al., 2018).

Parents and adults should understand the important role they play in modelling life jacket use for children because parents play a crucial role in their children’s acceptance and appreciation of safety information and understanding of the importance of life jacket use. Their modelling of life jackets also may encourage other adults to do the same. While children should wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket to prevent them from drowning, adults should wear them for the sake of being able to effect a swift rescue of themselves or others as well as model safe behavior for the next generation.

### Conclusion

By expanding the *KDF* program to strengthen its family-centered approach to drowning prevention by targeting parents and family members, providing safety information to families, and having parents model life jacket use, *KDF* can increase children’s likelihood of using life jackets – and their parents’ likelihood of using life jackets, too. Continued efforts are needed to better address drowning incidents in Alaska and to improve prevention programs that target drowning (McLaughlin & Castrodale, 2014). Examining drowning prevention programs such as *KDF* provides opportunities to identify ways to strengthen these programs and provides insight into whether or not these programs are successfully meeting their goals.

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