



Boat Talk: See how Michigan's rules have changed for teens on jet skis

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At 14 years old, teens are too young to drive a car alone. But for the last several years, with a boating-safety certificate, they still could slide into the seat of a jet ski and take off through the waves for some fun on a hot day.

This summer, things are different.

Fourteen-year-olds who last year could legally operate a personal water craft in Michigan alone can no longer do so without direct supervision until their 16th birthday.



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Ashleigh Iserman's Law, signed in 2008 by former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, changed the minimum age of personal water craft operation effective Oct. 1, 2011.

For those not aware of the switch, it could equate to a whole lot of confusion, or possibly a boating violation this summer.

I'll try to save you the heartache with this week's Boat Talk, a weekly column running through Labor Day to answer your questions about boating safety and laws.

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We're going to take a closer look at the change in age along with Allegan Sheriff's Sgt. Cory Hunt, who heads up the department's marine unit.

The good news? Hopefully you'll walk away with a better understanding of recent changes.

The old rules

First, a little history. **Ashleigh Iserman**, a teen from Rochester Hills, died in 2004 while operating a personal water craft at a friend's graduation party — the day before her own.

The 17-year-old looked behind at a tuber she was towing and collided with a boat. She died instantly.

She did not have a boat-safety certificate, which is required in Michigan for anyone born after Dec. 31, 1978, in order to operate a personal water craft.

At the time, a child 12 or 13 years of age could legally operate a personal water craft if accompanied by a parent or legal guardian if they both had boating safety certificates. A teen 14 or older with the certificate could operate a personal water craft alone.

The new rules

Under the new law, which bears Iserman's name, riders must be at least 14 or 15 and comply with at least one of the following stipulations:

- The person is riding with a parent or guardian, or a person 21 or older designated by the parent or guardian.
- The person is operating or riding a personal water craft at a distance of not more than 100 feet from his or her parent or guardian, or that designated person 21 or older.

According to Allegan Sheriff's Sgt. Hunt, that person 100 feet away does not have to be in the water. But often, operating a jet ski that close to shore violates no wake laws or other local regulations.

And getting to a child in trouble can be more difficult from land.

"We would certainly recommend that they're also out there on a personal water craft as well for direct supervision," Hunt said.

If an underage teen is found to be operating a personal water craft, the owner also could be cited by police. Authorities will verify the owner and talk with that person to determine if they were aware of the situation.

"A vast majority of the marine safety laws can also apply to the owner if they knowingly allow someone to do something illegal," Hunt said.

Fees associated with citations vary in different places around the state, he said.

Boating rules

The rules are different for operating a boat and relate to how fast it can travel.

According to Hunt, anyone can operate a boat with an engine of no more than 6 horsepower.

A person under age 12 may operate a boat with a person onboard at least 16 years of age if the engine does not exceed 35 horsepower.

From ages 12 to 15, a person can exceed the lower speed limits with a boating safety certificate on board or a person 16 or older.

At 16, a person can operate a boat of any speed without supervision.

A few readers last week asked about boater's safety courses offered around West Michigan.

The Kent, Ottawa and Allegan sheriff's departments offer classes this summer, free of charge. There is a fee for the test.

According to Hunt, classes generally last six hours and cover everything from preparing to go out on the water to how to handle emergency situations.

He recommends parents and children attend together. (You don't want your child correcting your operating skills, right?)

"I guarantee, if you come, even if you are a lifelong boater, you will learn things," Hunt said.

Questions about the process of obtaining boater's safety certification? **Here's some additional information.**

Check with your local sheriff's department for information on available boater's safety classes. Here is some helpful information for those around West Michigan:

- Information on **a few Ottawa County contacts and classes there.**
- Information **on Kent County contacts and classes there.**
- Information on **Allegan Boater's Safety Classes .**
- Information on **classes in the Kalamazoo area.**

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