



A Lifeguard's Beach Safety Tips

by Sgt. Ed Fisher
Special to the Dispatch

The writer is a 22-year veteran of the Beach patrol. In the off-season, he is an elementary school teacher in Montgomery County. The OCBP consist of over 200 men and women dedicated to ocean rescue and maintaining a safe and orderly environment on Ocean City's beach. The Surf Rescue Technicians guard the beach seven days a week from 10 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.



Keep an Eye on Your Children When at the Beach

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When you come to the beach please look after your children very carefully, so they don't get lost. A lifeguard's primary concern is watching the water, but often on busy days guards spend a portion of their time watching after lost children and trying to reunite them with their parents. In fact, the statistics regarding lost children on the beach are staggering. On a busy weekend in July it is not uncommon to have over 100 lost children cases. When you see our guards using the flags to communicate it is often regarding lost children.

The reason that so many children go missing on the beach is a result of a few factors. First, if parents are not paying close attention and watching their child's every move they are almost sure to get away. When kids come to the beach their primary and probably only concern, is to have fun. So if mum and dad are not watching, little Johnny is going to be a half-mile down the beach before you can say "gone with the wind."

Another factor is the sea of people and the uniformity of the way things look on the beach. When you're 3 feet tall at best and can only see the underside of umbrellas and beach towels, it is easy to get confused. Lastly, the beach and ocean conditions play a factor. We find that on days when the tide is low during the busy parts of the day more children get lost because there is more space between the umbrella line and the ocean. Furthermore, winds can play a factor. Believe it or not the kids go with the wind. We almost always locate children down wind from where they begin.

I keep referring to the kids as lost, but in a way it is the parents that are lost. So to avoid being a lost parent:

1. Tell your child if they get separated they should go right to a lifeguard. The vast majority of lost children are returned to their parents within 15 minutes. However, the kids that listen to their parent's lesson to not talk to strangers are in for the long haul if the child includes lifeguards in the stranger category (by checking in with the lifeguard and introducing your children they are less likely to wander away and if they do, will feel comfortable approaching one of our lifeguards on a stand). We have had children walk five miles on the beach and be missing for the better part of a day. These situations could have been avoided (and the incredible worry by the parents) if someone told them to go to the lifeguard.

2. If your child is old enough, teach them the street they are on and the name or address of the place they are staying.
3. Try giving them a frame of reference to look for such as a building or sign that will help them find their way back to your spot on the beach.
4. Keep a close eye on them at all times. When you have a child less than 15 or 16 there really is no naptime.
5. If they are old enough teach them a cell phone number. The beach patrol can have our dispatcher try to reach the parent on the phone if the child knows their parent's cell phone number.

My main goal is that many parents read this and realize the hefty responsibility that comes with bringing a child to the beach. Even consider bringing your child up to the lifeguard and introducing them to the guard as soon as you come to the beach. Remember, we're glad you're here. Cheers!!



Captain's Note: Although we often talk about lost kids, they really are not all children. We reunite individuals that range from under one year old to the mid 90s. A typical season will involved between 1,000 and 2,000 lost and found individuals. The difference between a lost individual and a found individual depends on whom our first contact is with. If the person who is missing approaches a lifeguard we call that a found person. If the person approaches a guard and they are missing someone, we refer to that as a lost individual. Interestingly, most found individuals under the age of 10 are discovered and brought to the lifeguard by other moms on the beach who notice that the child looks lost and upset. The good news to these staggering numbers is that we have a 100 percent return rate.

After 40 years in this job I am still amazed at the number of lost and found individuals that we reunite each summer. The ages range from under one year (how do you loose a child that can not walk?) and our senior citizens who have become disoriented (some have been in their 90s). I have been involved with a 4 year old who walked 8 miles into Delaware's unguarded beaches and was missing for several hours. I have spoken to parents reporting a child who had been missing for several hours before they even showed any concern. I have watched a hysterical parent who has been praying for the safe return of a child. Upon seeing the child safe but scared they proceed to spank the child for getting lost and "scaring everyone half to death". In all these different scenarios there are three common factors; 100% of all lost and found individuals have been found safe, 80% of the time a lost child was being "watched" by the father and all of these would have been easily prevented or solved in little time if the parents had talked with the child about what to do. Introduce your family to your "lifeguard" everyday.

You may be interested to know that the majority of messages being sent between lifeguards are communicating about lost and found individuals and potential dangers.

The following is an example of the information that the surf rescue technician gathers for each lost or found child and then communicates through semaphore (flags) to the surrounding guards.

L G N Brooke A SIX JEANS

Lost Girl Name Brooke Age six bathing suit color jeans

This is a typical message that SRTs send between adjoining stands. This information is also radioed in to a centralized dispatch for broadcast throughout Ocean City.

To learn more about semaphore visit the Beach Patrol website, www.ococean.com/ocbp and click on Semaphore Alphabet on the left.

Photo by Kristin Josen: Ocean City Beach Patrol Sgt. Ed Fisher is approached by a small child who wandered off the boardwalk. This found child was returned in less than five minutes using the standard procedure for lost/found individuals.

