



National
Guidance
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Group Safety at Water Margins

This document covers activities that might take place near or in water – such as a walk along a river bank or seashore, collecting samples from ponds and streams, or paddling or walking in gentle, shallow water. It does **not** cover swimming and other activities that require water safety or rescue qualifications and equipment or water-going craft.

Leaders planning for young people to enter the water should also read document 7o “Natural Water Bathing”.

The Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) National Water Safety Management Programme provides a flexible, modular framework of training to meet the needs of a wide range of users reflecting the range of activities that take place in and around the water’s edge. Further details are available at:
<http://www.rlss.org.uk/professional-qualifications/nwsmp/>.

Things to Think About Before you Go

1. Why are we going?

The water environment provides wonderful opportunities for learning, play, enjoyment and challenge. The best way to help young people to be safe around water is to teach them to swim, and for them to learn (through guided and supervised first-hand experience) safe practices around water and to identify safe and dangerous locations. Whatever your reason for going, having a clear purpose and plan will help your group to get the most from the day – and will help to maintain safety.

2. How well do I know my group?

Knowing the answers to the following will be helpful in developing an appropriate plan:

- What is the age range of the group?
- Are the young people used to an outdoor environment?
- What is each individual’s swimming ability and level of water confidence (these are not the same thing)?
- Can the young people’s behaviour be trusted?
- How physically able is the group?
- Does anyone have special educational or medical needs?

- Will group members have warm, waterproof clothing, suitable footwear, spare clothes, a towel?

3. Who will be in charge?

You need to assess accurately your own competence to lead the proposed visit. It is important to know and comply with any relevant policy your employer may have. It may also be sensible to seek advice from your employer's Outdoor Education Adviser.

If the proposed activity is beyond your level of competence or resource, then you should make different plans that are within your capacity. Alternatively you could approach an external provider to lead those aspects that are beyond your capacity. Whatever you choose to do, be sure that everyone knows what should be happening and who is responsible during the visit.

Getting Ready to Go

Some of the things you will need to consider are:

1. Who will help me?

You will need enough competent leaders to provide effective supervision for your particular group, activity and venue. You need to be clear about other leaders' skills, experience and attitudes to work in a water or near water environment.

2. How can I prepare the group?

Explain to group members in advance what is expected of them, the purpose of the visit, the environment being visited and any hazards. If necessary, obtain informed consent from group members' parents.

3. How well do I know the place?

It is good practice to make a pre-visit before you go there with a group. Having a competent person with you on a pre-visit can help you to identify hazards and assist you if you get into difficulty. Here are some of the things you should think about during planning or on a pre-visit:

- What are the hazards?
- If you will be working near water, how likely is it that someone will fall in?
- If someone did fall in, could you get them out by reaching with a towel, a stick, a piece of clothing, or any public safety equipment that is available? Could you wade in to get them without putting yourself in danger? Is it possible that a swimming rescue may be required? Remember that sudden and unexpected immersion in cold water has a rapid and dramatic effect on the body's systems and will impair people's ability to reach safety.
- Identify a Plan B should conditions not be appropriate when you arrive.
- If you have been trained, and are currently practised in the use of throwlines, you may decide to take one with you. However, remember that taking a throwline is not a reason to take a risk. Using Plan B is preferable to using a throwline.

- What lies downstream, or around the corner from your planned work area – is there a fallen tree, a fence, a weir, a waterfall – or any other hazard? If you are not happy with your choice of location, look for a safer one.
- If you do plan to enter the water, participants must be able to get in and out easily. Consider access and egress points, the steepness of the slope, the slipperiness of the ground, the depth of any mud and the vegetation.
- You also need to be aware of underwater hazards (such as rocks or roots which can trap feet, rusty cans or wire which can cut, or strong currents). The best way to check for hazards is to walk through the area where there is going to be paddling.
- Remember that moving water above ones knees may cause loss of footing. Consider whether this is likely at your venue.
- Consider water quality - this can be affected by factors such as rainfall or hot weather. Bacteria may derive from chemicals, sewage, dead animals or other causes. Have a look round for any obvious signs such as cloudiness in the water, or froth on the surface. Have you considered precautions against infection from Weil's Disease, and sharing understanding of the disease with parents?
- Where are the toilets and what are the toileting considerations for the venue?
- Consider if groups may need to change, and if so where.
- Emergency procedures - know what assistance is available if needed, where the nearest hospital is, and where vehicles can access any walking route alongside water. Remember that mobile telephones may not work in remote areas.

4. What could change?

You need to consider how each of the following may change your plan – possibly also causing a change to the prepared Plan B or a complete cancellation of the activity:

a. The surroundings

Are there cliffs above you (could someone or an animal knock loose stones down) or below you (how close to the edge are you)? Is there livestock nearby (could it enter your area)? Ask somebody with good local knowledge (perhaps the land or water owner) if there have been any changes to the area, or whether the local environment alters regularly.

b. The weather

Get a weather forecast before you go and understand how it might affect your location and planned activity. Heavy or persistent rainfall can alter situations enormously and rapidly – even when it is falling elsewhere. Riverbanks will become slippery, streams and rivers can rise quickly and flow faster, mud or landslides can occur. Wind will alter sea states and may interact with tidal streams or estuary currents.

c. Tidal conditions

If you are going near the sea or an estuary, check tidal conditions so you know when high tide is, how high it will reach, and whether there are any strong local currents. Could you be cut-off or submerged by a sudden wave or quick rise in

the tide level? The tide may advance more quickly than your group can retreat. Also beware of steeply shelving shingle beaches, where one step could be the difference between paddling and taking someone out of their depth. Everyone in the group should be briefed and aware of any activity time constraints.

5. What to wear?

In damp, cold weather wearing suitable clothing with waterproof trousers and jacket will help to keep your group warm and dry. Wellingtons or other waterproof boots may be a good idea – however wellingtons can fill with water and make it difficult to reach safety. You should also take some spare clothing and towels with you. In warm weather sunscreen, hats and long sleeves may be needed. Be clear about when, if at all, footwear can be removed.

Plan B

Plan B is an alternative – not an emergency procedure. Plan B should be pre-checked and prepared in the same way as plan A. Plan B might consist of doing the same activity at a different location, or a different activity altogether. Be prepared to move to Plan B before or even during the activity.

If you visit a place regularly you might be able to identify cut-off criteria. These are signs that circumstances have changed such that you need to move to Plan B. Examples might include the river or tide having risen above a certain point. However, remember that visiting one venue once a year for ten years is ten days' experience – not ten years'.

Things to Think About on the Day

- Your emergency base contact must know where you are going, what you will be doing and when you expect to return. Also leave details of any alternative plans.
- Brief the group in a suitable place before the water is reached.
- Always get a local weather forecast on the day of your visit – and know the difference it will make to your plans and location.
- Review the situation - on arrival at your venue reconsider the key issues that were raised in your pre-visit. Has anything changed that means you should change to Plan B? During the visit be constantly alert to changes and be prepared to adapt plans or cut short the activity.
- Your group may well be disappointed if they cannot complete the activity that was originally planned. A well-briefed group and a good Plan B can help to overcome this disappointment. If you move to Plan B, notify your base.

Just because you did it last year – does not mean that you have to do it this year!

Just because it was safe last year – does not mean it is safe this year!

Group Management

1. Behaviour

Agree the safety rules and expectations before the visit and stick to them. If you decided on your pre-visit that it was unsafe to enter the water, then have confidence in your decision and do not be pressured into changing it. If you do enter water, keeping the group on task will help to ensure safety, as incidents are more likely to occur during unstructured activity. Ensure that the group is aware that pushing or dragging others into water are unsafe and unacceptable practices.

Set physical boundaries beyond which the group should not venture. You might use fixed landscape features such as a wall, or place your own markers.

2. Supervision

Having small groups, each with its own leader, is often better than one large group with several leaders. Ideally there will be enough leaders so that the overall leader does not have their own group. Ensure that small group leaders of sub-groups complete regular head counts and are aware of where everyone is at all times while in or near water.

If you are walking along a canal towpath, or any other narrow track near water, make sure that everyone present is aware of the dangers and how to respond. Leaders may consider placing themselves between the group and a potential hazard.

3. Health and hygiene

Make sure your group wash their hands before eating, and if appropriate shower upon return. If any members of your group fall ill following the visit, advise them to tell their GP where they've been and what you were doing.

Other Considerations

The more often you visit a venue, the more confident you will become – but beware complacency! It is still important to check the venue before each Visit, as things could have changed since your last visit.

Try to visit more venues so that you have a range of alternative plans and develop your understanding of the outdoor environment and the weather.

Plan for succession - maintain and develop your own skills by asking for training and assisting on visits led by more experienced people, but also help others to develop by asking them to assist on your visits.

