

BB-1: Camp Program: Swim Areas

In This Module

- [OVERVIEW](#)
- [SWIM CHECK STRATEGIES](#)
 - Leader Communication
 - Parent/Caregiver Communication
 - Nonswimmers
 - Practice Jumps
 - Reach Poles and Edge Lanes
- [CLOTHES CHANGING SPACES](#)
- [OPERATING STRATEGIES](#)
 - Flotation Aids
 - Early Start and Departure
 - Shade for Mobility Equipment
 - Managing Waves & Splashing
- [SPECIFIC SITUATIONS](#)
 - Deaf Scouts and Scouts that are Non-verbal
 - Blind Scouts
 - Physical Disabilities
 - Intellectual Disabilities
 - Autism

This Module in PDF:

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OVERVIEW

This module is for Swim Area Directors at BSA Scout Camps. It applies to all ages of Scouting. The goal is to provide a concise guide that focuses on the interaction between various types of disabilities and swim area programming. This module focuses on things that are within the control of the swim area staff rather than permanent improvements to the facilities.

Every willing Scout should have opportunity to get into the water and have fun. Many swimming area hours get dedicated to advancement-related activities like merit badges, Cub adventures, and special award opportunities like snorkel, scuba, and mile swim. However, **opportunities for recreational time in the water are especially important for Scouts with disabilities** so they can enjoy camp, try new things, and cool off on hot days.

A pool area has a natural advantage over other camp program areas in that it already has hard surfaces and relatively good accessibility. (Shoreline access is

discussed in [Module BB-2](#).) The swim area staff has the advantage of getting to talk to leaders from every unit and evaluate almost every camper during swim check. Much of this module is centered on the swim check process and how to make the most of it.

You will encounter some Scouts whose disabilities are obvious, like physical disabilities, blind, deaf, or Down syndrome. Physical disabilities include people who need mobility equipment like wheelchairs and crutches, but also include people that have limited strength, endurance, or coordination. For every obvious disability you encounter, there will be several Scouts with less obvious special needs like learning disabilities, ADHD, autism, history of seizures, or anxiety disorders. Camp is exciting and challenging and over the course of a multi-day camp session, Scouts with disabilities may tire out or act out more as time goes on. Some Scouts with milder special needs may start camp without needing accommodations but begin to need them later on.

A last thing to remember is that young swimmers may need extra support and consideration even though they are not disabled and do not have an identified special need.

SWIM CHECK STRATEGIES

Leader Communication – The starting point for integration of Scouts with special needs is talking to the unit leaders that bring the Scouts to swim check. The leaders can identify Scouts with known disabilities or needs for you. Ask what types of accommodations they think are needed and how your staff can help.

Parent/Caregiver Communication – It is not unusual for a parent, family member, or caregiver to attend camp with their Scout with a disability and to be at swim check. This is a good time to ask what their individual goals are for their child when it comes to swimming. Even if the caregiver is used to physically supporting the Scout in the water, encourage the Scout to bring a similar age buddy to the swim area for the fun and social aspects of swimming. Three-person buddy groups with two Scouts and a caregiver are fine.

Nonswimmers – Be sure to pay attention to the Scouts that do not want to attempt the swim test and plan to be nonswimmers. Remind them that they don't have to be able to swim to come to the swim area and play in the water. Encourage them to come for instructional swim time and learn. Encourage them to dangle their feet in the water while the others are doing swim tests. Not only does this let them cool off, it gives you a way to identify Scouts that have sensory issues and are unable to be in the water at all.

Practice Jumps – The first step of the swim test, jumping off and letting your head go underwater, is often the most daunting part for novice swimmers. Many Scouts are short enough that you can give them an opportunity to take a practice jump in a part of the swim area that is deep enough for them to go underwater, but where an adult can stand in the water. Knowing that there will be someone in the water to help them if they need it can help Scouts get over the mental hump. Another way to practice is with a sliding/hopping entry from a

seated position on the edge of the dock or pool. A lower entry gives the experience of going under the water with less splashing.

Reach Poles and Edge Lanes – Hearing and seeing in the water are a little difficult for everyone, and swim areas tend to be noisy. Scouts with poor vision benefit from having a swimming lane along the side of the pool, dock, or a buddy boat where they can touch off and maintain their position in the lane. With either vision or hearing limitations, the lifeguard supervising the test can communicate with the swimmer with touches from a reach pole. Before the swimmers enter the water, explain how and where you will touch them if the swimmer is drifting off course or getting close to the end of the swim area for a turn.

CLOTHES CHANGING SPACES

Some young Scouts and Scouts with special needs and disabilities have a hard time changing clothes by themselves. It is OK to encourage them and their caregivers to change clothes at their campsites, but depending on how tightly the camp program is scheduled, they may need to change at the swim area. We assume that your facility has divided spaces for youth male, youth female, adult male, and adult female changing spaces but you may not have individual privacy partitions. If your swim area does not have a private space where an adult family member can enter along with their Scout, or a private space large enough for both a wheelchair user and a caregiver to move around in, you may need to improvise in some way. One option is to allow the Scout/caregiver pair to take over the swim area office for a few minutes. Another option is to pitch a tent nearby that can be used as a changing space. The doorway of the tent needs to be wide enough for wheelchair access and tall enough to walk through while standing up, to support users of crutches and those pushing wheelchairs.

OPERATING STRATEGIES

Flotation Aids – Most safety concerns for people with physical disabilities can be solved by using flotation aids. PFDs, pool floats, kickboards, small surfboards, and paddleboards are options to allow Scouts to move about in the water on their own. PFDs are also helpful for Scouts who are anxious in the water or have experienced seizures. Knowing for certain they can remain on the surface can allow Scouts to relax and have fun while they improve their swimming skills. As a practical matter, there is no reason to restrict the use of flotation aids during recreational swimming periods.

Early Start and Departure – A person who uses a wheelchair or crutches will need some help to get in and out of the water because the equipment needs to be moved to the water's edge to enter and then be moved away to have a clear walkway around the swim area. This situation is easier to manage if these swim area users are allowed to get into the area before the general group is released to get in the water, similar to preboarding on an airline flight. Some Scouts with sensory noise challenges can benefit from this as well. As a counterpart, it is also a good idea to assist them by giving them a head start at the end of a swimming period so they can

move away from the water, move their buddy tags, and get into the changing areas before the walkways get crowded with exiting swimmers.

Shade for Mobility Equipment – Wheelchairs and other mobility equipment need to be shaded or covered while the user is in the water. Direct sun can make the surfaces hot enough to burn. This is particularly important because some people with physical disabilities also have nerve conditions where they cannot feel heat and/or pain and will not know they are being injured.

Managing Waves & Splashing – There are some Scouts that will find the splashing and wave action in a crowded area at open swim time to be distressing, either because they have limited mobility to protect their faces or have sensory issues with noise or being surprised by water hitting their faces. If you take a look at the overall swim schedule, you may be able to accommodate these Scouts by allowing them to have recreational water time alongside the instructional swim class or a smaller merit badge/adventure/award class.

SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

Deaf Scouts and Scouts that are Non-verbal – Hearing aids or cochlear implants that a deaf Scout may use most of the time cannot get wet, so they are not worn when swimming. A Scout that relies on a communications device using keyboards or touch symbols to create speech has the same problem (in general, these are called AACs, or augmentative and alternative communication devices). Having a swim buddy that can hear/speak and translate for the Scout is the easiest solution, but it is good to also have some hand signals worked out between the Scout and the swim area staff in advance. It is also possible for the staff to get someone's attention with a reach pole.

Blind Scouts – For free swimming, the Scout will need a sighted buddy to help avoid obstacles. All of the rescue methods required for Scout ranks can be performed using sound to locate the target subject. Surface rescue techniques for Swimming and Lifesaving merit badges can also be performed by ear. These merit badges have requirements to bring an object up from the bottom, which might be more difficult for a blind Scout. However, the requirements do not say that the Scout must find the object on his or her own, or that an aid to locating it cannot be used.

Physical Disabilities – Swim area staffers may need to help get a Scout transferred from a chair into the water. Even though these Scouts might look frail, that does not necessarily mean they are fragile. When Scouts are unable to control their movement in the water, they need a responsible buddy to stay with them and move them through the water. An important thing about the buddy is that the Scout needs to be able to trust the buddy completely. If another Scout is going to be a helper, the helper needs to be taught that he or she can never play a trick in the water on the Scout that needs help.

Intellectual Disabilities – Some Scouts with intellectual disabilities may be hard to coax out of the water when you need them to come out, because they are having fun. When they come back for another swim session, take a minute to talk with

them to reach an agreement about how they will behave when it is time to come out and how you will let them know it is time to come out.

Autism – Some Scouts on the autism spectrum have such a strong sensory aversion to getting into the water that the standard BSA swimming requirements are hard or impossible for them to achieve. They don't look any different from other Scouts, so it is hard for others to understand this. Leaders and family members may be strongly motivated to get them through the beginner and swimmer tests so they can advance in rank. Where this impacts the swim area operation is that the regular swim check environment is noisy and hurried enough that the Scout cannot do his or her best and then Scout can become a bottleneck in the process. If you sense this is going on, act promptly and quietly offer the Scout/Leader/family member the option of coming back to the swim area at a less busy time to attempt the swim test. This keeps a Scout that is already in an uncomfortable situation from becoming a spectacle and a target for teasing.