

BB-2: Camp Programs: Waterfront and Boating

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OVERVIEW

This module is for Waterfront Directors at BSA Scout Camps and supplements the information in *Safety Afloat*, which is the authoritative document. 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 programming in natural bodies of water and with boats. This module focuses on things that are within the control of the waterfront staff rather than permanent improvements to the facilities. **Since aquatics safety information is presented at varying levels of detail across BSA documents and web resources, key information has been copied over into this module for easy reference.** If your camp conducts its swimming activities at a waterfront location, see [Module BB-1](#) for information on swim area operations.

Every willing Scout should have opportunity to get in and onto the water and have fun.

Opportunities for recreational time on the water are especially important for Scouts with disabilities so they can enjoy camp, try new things, and cool off on hot days. While techniques discussed here can be applied to watercraft instruction time like merit badge classes, this module focuses on the less structured recreational time.

The waterfront program area has a natural advantage over other camp program areas. The most widely effective accommodation for Scouts with disabilities in boats and in open water is wearing a personal flotation device (PFD). Since PFDs are required for every activity in a natural body of water besides swimming in a controlled area, no extra equipment or planning is required for many Scouts with special needs or disabilities.

The waterfront program area also has more complexity than some other program areas. There is a wide variety of watercraft that can be used and there may be aquatics play structures, swimming areas, and fishing areas located in or near boating areas. Non-powered craft include canoes, kayaks, rowboats, paddleboats, small sailboats, and standup paddleboards. Motor powered craft include “Jet Ski®” personal watercraft (PWC), motorboats, and pontoon boats. Each type of watercraft has its own procedures and sequences for launching, propelling, steering, and landing that need to be taught and adhered to.

Fishing activities are addressed in Module TBD and swimming areas are addressed in [Module BB-1](#)

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Since passing the BSA swim test is a prerequisite for the watercraft merit badges, we tend to

assume that a Scout that can pass the swim test can do everything else it takes to operate a watercraft. The swim test is not a clean dividing line. Some people who could not complete the swim test, like a person with lower body paralysis, could successfully paddle, row, sail, or drive. There are also people who can physically complete the swim test and all the actions needed for boat handling, but need extra instruction or time to learn the skills of boating or need a mature person in the boat as a buddy to assist with decision making.

COMMUNICATION

Some Scouts have disabilities that are obvious, like physical disabilities, blind, deaf, or Down syndrome. For every obvious disability you encounter, there will be several Scouts with less obvious special needs like learning disabilities, ADHD, autism, 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.

The Scouts that come to participate at the waterfront do not necessarily identify themselves to the staff as having a special need. The key thing to remember is if a Scout is making errors in following instructions or rules it could easily be due to features of a special need or disability rather than ignorance or disobedience. If you take a little time to interact with the Scout directly, you can get a sense of whether extra help will be needed.

If you have a question or concern about an individual Scout and want to know more about him or her, reach out to the adults from the unit. First, look around your program area. In some instances, a family member, caregiver, or unit leader is discreetly watching their Scout from a distance. Feel free to approach while someone else on your staff watches over the Scout. Otherwise you will have to track down an appropriate adult. If you won't be able to leave the waterfront during "business hours" you can try to catch the unit leaders at the next mealtime or use your camp commissioners to reach out to the leaders and ask them to come to see you at the waterfront.

MOBILITY ACCESS TO THE WATER'S EDGE

It is rare for a camp to have a wheelchair accessible path all the way to the water's edge. Users of wheelchairs and crutches often need vehicle transportation from the central area of the camp to the waterfront. Local conditions, like the steepness of the shoreline, vary too much to give specific advice, but it is worthwhile to think through in advance how the waterfront staff will generally transport such a Scout from the last accessible point to the water and into a boat. If the Scout must be physically carried, take guidance from the Scout, family member, or caregiver on the most comfortable and safe way to do so.

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.

INCLUDING NONSWIMMERS & BEGINNER SWIMMERS

For activity afloat, those not classified as a swimmer are limited to multiperson craft during outings or float trips on calm water with little likelihood of capsizing or falling overboard. They may operate a fixed-seat rowboat or pedal boat accompanied by a buddy who is a swimmer. They may paddle or ride in a canoe or other paddle craft with an adult swimmer skilled in that craft as a buddy. They may ride as part of a group on a motorboat or sailboat operated by a skilled adult.

From Safety Afloat – Point 3 – Swimming Ability

To restate this in the affirmative, Scouts of any ability level may go out in small boats. They do not have to pass the BSA swimmer-level test first. They may learn to paddle, row, and operate boats if they are willing and physically able to do so. With precautions, Scouts may go out in boats even if they cannot paddle, row, or pedal.

As we will discuss later, you may need to make individualized adjustments to allow a Scout or adult with a special need or disability on the water. Some examples are:

- Equipment modifications like adding backrests, securing the Scout into the seat on larger boats, increased flotation aids, etc.
- An increased level of skill for the Scout's buddy. This could be aquatics skill, demonstrated by merit badges or certifications, or it could be maturity and decision-making.
- A three-person buddy group where one of the buddies could focus attention on the Scout with the disability after an overturn.
- Improving the supervision ratio for the activity as a whole, using aquatics staff and other qualified adults and or support boats.

Be creative. These adjustments might require deviations from BSA Aquatics rules and procedures or deviations from the traditions of the camp. There is [a decision framework \(flowchart\)](#) to meet the objective of safety when not every rule can be followed. It is reasonable to compensate for one rule that needs to be relaxed by making another procedure more restrictive.

PFD RISK ASSESSMENT

A Scout that completes the BSA swimmer-level test in a clear pool may not be ready for an open water experience where the bottom is not visible or is not smooth. The difficulties can be mental as well as physical. We expect that beginners and nonswimmers will be on calm water and wearing PFDs, but for a Scout with a disability you may want to assess the risk for the Scout if he or she goes into the water unexpectedly. Some PFDs are designed to help turn a person face-up in the water and others are not. It is good to know if the Scout with limited mobility is capable of turning face-up and floating while wearing a PFD.

With the Scout's consent, this can be evaluated in shallow water by turning the Scout face down in the water and seeing if the Scout will need assistance to turn face up. This also tells you whether the Scout is likely to panic if he or she ends up in the water. Understand that if a Scout is not able to turn face up without assistance, that does not disqualify the Scout, it just means you need to account for that in your planning.

A PFD assessment has other potential benefits and you may want to implement it with all of your Scouts. With or without a disability, some Scouts have little prior experience being in open/murky water or using a PFD. If a Scout has anxiety with being in murky water, a PFD assessment will reveal this. The assessment is also a chance for the Scout to learn to trust that the PFD works, and to become more confident about going on the water. Another thing to remember is your interest and professionalism in conducting a PFD assessment gives the supporting family members or caregivers confidence in you and your program.

BUDDIES AND BUDDY BOATS

While the general responsibilities of a swim buddy and buddy boat are well understood, namely to maintain a lookout for one another and assist if there is a problem, the priorities can change when one of the boaters has a special need or disability. This is partially addressed by requiring a beginner or nonswimmer to have an adult buddy when they are in a paddlecraft (e.g. canoe, SUP, kayak). Even if an adult is not required by *Safety Afloat*, the waterfront staff will want to make sure that a Scout with a disability has a more skilled and mature buddy than ordinary, that the buddy is

aware of the disability, and is prepared to prioritize assisting the buddy over recovering the boat.

The role of the buddy boat may need to be emphasized as well. It needs to be clear which boat is the buddy boat for the Scout with a disability and the people in that boat understand that the boats need to stay closer together than they would otherwise.

SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

Physical Disabilities – Remember that physical disabilities can include a variety of conditions, not just difficulty walking. They include upper body limitations and limitations on muscle control, stability, grip, or coordination. It is difficult to give specific guidance for boating because of the wide variety of watercraft, water conditions, and limitations a Scout could have. If a wheelchair is going onboard a larger craft, there need to be provisions to tie down the wheelchair so it does not move around on deck. For smaller craft, you may need to build a seat back for the seat to support the Scout's upper body. Tying a Scout down is not advised.

If the Scout is unable to maintain a safe, face-up floating position on his or her own, the buddy will need to be able to function as a lifeguard. *Safety Afloat* requires the buddy to be an adult who has passed the BSA swimmer-level test. However, that may not be enough skill level by itself to manage the risks. The adult buddy needs to be familiar and comfortable enough with the watercraft that he or she can give due attention to the Scout, and also needs to have in-the-water rescue skills to assist the Scout in the event of an overturn.

Scouts with a physical disability, even moderate ones where they could be rated as a swimmer, should not be alone in a boat. That does not mean that a capable Scout cannot do the solo boat handling required for merit badges (e.g. paddle a canoe or kayak, steer a sailboat, or drive a motorboat), but it does mean there should be a second person on board to assist in an emergency. A good example of this need would be a Scout that experiences seizures.

Blind Scouts – The standard BSA *Safety Afloat* rules are generally sufficient, provided a blind Scout is paired with a sighted buddy. The sighted buddy provides verbal guidance for the direction to go, but does not have to be steering the boat. With one-person craft, like kayaks or paddleboards on calm water, the buddy could in fact be in a buddy boat. For boating merit badges that require solo boat handling, a buddy needs to be aboard or close by to provide directions (left/right) while the Scout performs the requirement.

Deaf Scouts and Scouts that are Non-verbal – The hearing aids or cochlear implants that a deaf Scout may use most of the time cannot get wet, so they are not worn in boats that can overturn. A Scout that uses a communication device^[3] for speaking has the same problem. The Scout needs a boat buddy who can hear/speak and translate for the Scout. This is particularly important in a waterfront area where the staff cannot reliably get someone's attention by touching or hand signals. Within the boat, the deaf Scout and buddy need to have some nonverbal signals worked out between them in advance of the activity. There are several ways they can get each other's attention by touching or splashing. In small boats it may be practical to communicate by tapping on the hull and feeling the tap through the seat. Tap codes could be used for "go right", "go left", "faster", "slower", and "stop". The hand signals used for cycling could be adapted to boating as well.

Intellectual/Learning/Executive Function – Though distinct, these three classes of special needs relate to decision-making ability and learning/remembering sequences of operations. Executive Function refers to the broad collection of skills that go with the ability to organize work, such as breaking complex tasks down into simpler steps, prioritizing, placing work in sequential order, and dealing with the unexpected. This special need occurs on its own and in conjunction with ADHD and autism.

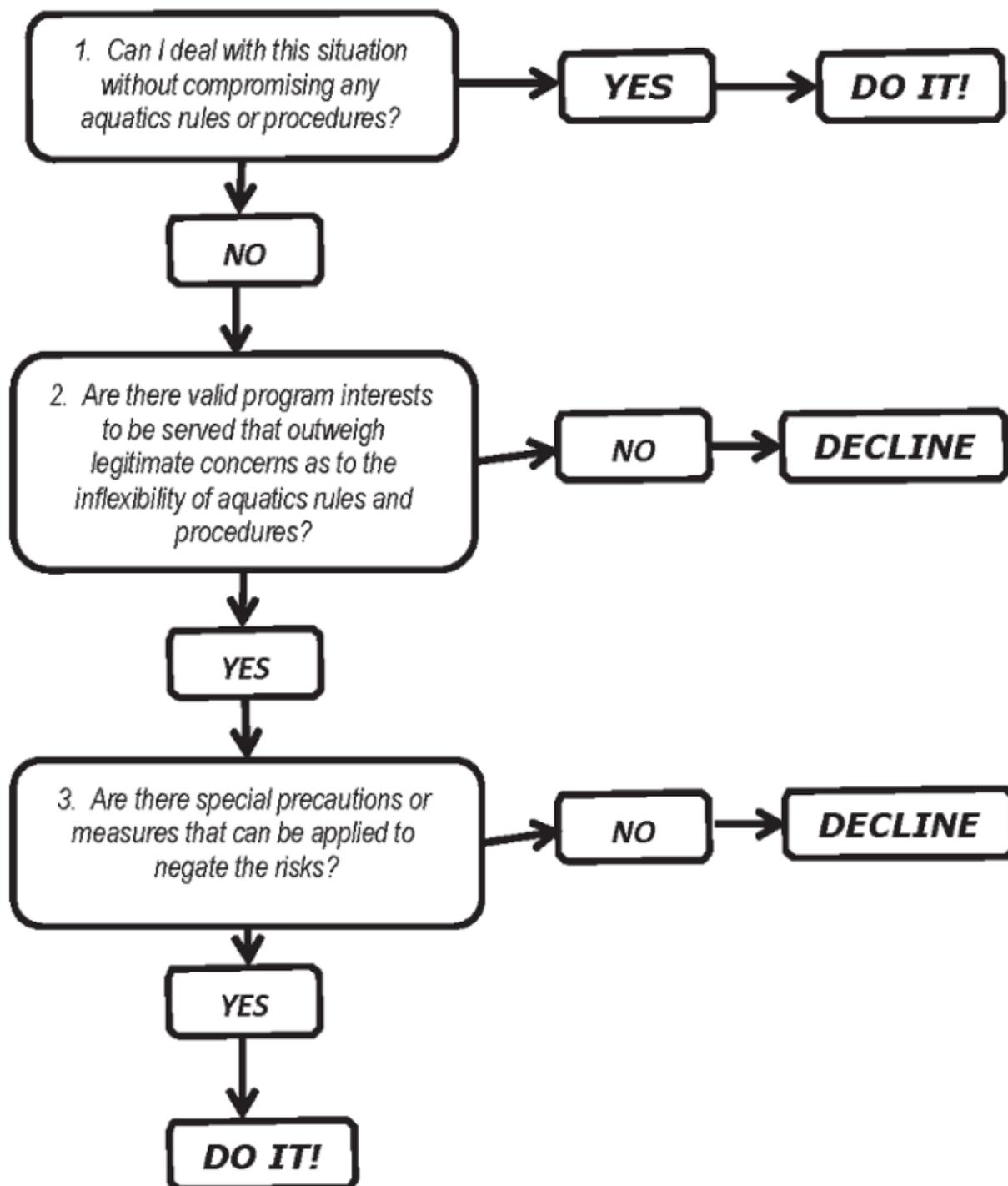
A Scout with a disability in intellectual/learning/executive function will need more instructional time than others and may need one-on-one instruction to learn necessary boating skills. In any

event, the Scout needs to be paired with a mature buddy that he or she is willing to take directions from. In this situation, the buddy takes on the responsibility of managing risk and is ready to assume leadership if a boat overturns or runs into trouble. In a group instruction situation, you may want such a Scout to be in the same boat as the instructor.

AQUATICS DECISION FRAMEWORK

The following is reproduced from a previous edition of the BSA Aquatics Staff Guide, p. 12-5.

The general policy objective behind all aquatics rules and procedures is to assure that the best possible program is delivered in a safe Scouting environment that encourages the youth members and their units to participate in aquatics activity.



Remember that policy is to serve the program, not the convenience of the Aquatics staff.

The circumstances in which there is no choice but to decline is rare but if you must decline, be firm, be sympathetic, be courteous, and suggest alternatives. While it may be easier to just say no, it's much more satisfying to suggest an alternative that helps the person accomplish much of their objective without compromising safety.

As far as possible, anticipate questions and problem situations in advance. Work with your camp management to plan ahead.

When making critical policy **decisions**, be sure all appropriate persons are involved in the decision making.