Safety Activity Checkpoints (SACs)

Canoeing

ACTIVITY	DAISY	BROWNIE	JUNIOR	CADETTE	SENIOR	AMBASSADOR	Is Prior Council Approval Required?	Is Activity Training, Certification, or Verified Experience Required?
Canoeing	*	**	***	C	S	A	Yes	Yes

*Daisies may canoe only on flat water with an experienced adult in each canoe.
**Brownies may canoe only on flat water and must stay within swimming distance of shore.
***Juniors may canoe on flat water within swimming distance of shore or on Class I river sections.

Connect with nature and friends by canoeing! Paddling can be as gentle or extreme as you like: take a leisurely trip on a quiet lake or river, or work up to extreme whitewater canoeing and racing. Experience a new culture with dragon boats or Hawaiian outrigger canoes. The choice is yours, and the memories are unforgettable.

General Checkpoints

Refer to the Safety Standards for general standards about supervision,transportation, first aid, and emergency plans, as well as inclusion and accessibility considerations.

Activity-Specific Checkpoints for Canoeing

Follow these basic reminders for each phase of planning. Check off items as you complete them, making sure to consider each sub-bullet.

Learn More

- Urge all participants to take ACA's free **online Paddlesports Safety course**.
- Improve your skills with these **short video tutorials** from Paddling.com.

Decision-Making Phase

☐ **Find a safe place to canoe.**

- Nearly any body of water is suitable for canoeing with the right instruction, equipment, and experience. Start on flat water with little to no current. Progress to more advanced conditions like trips on moving rivers and later, whitewater.
- **Paddling.com** and **American Whitewater** offer interactive maps of paddling locations.
- Canoeing is not permitted in whitewater above Class III.

☐ **Identify an expert.**

- Look for someone with one or more of the following certifications or qualifications:
  - **American Canoe Association** (ACA)—various certification levels
  - Girl Scouts Small Craft Safety Course (with canoe module)
  - American Red Cross Lifeguarding with Waterfront Module (for flat water, near shore only)
  - Prior expertise, with documented experience per your council's guidelines
- In addition, ensure the instructor has the appropriate background:
  - Experience teaching and supervising canoeing for the ages involved
  - Firsthand knowledge of the hazards and conditions at the canoeing location

☐ **Check ratios**. Ensure that the proper instructor-student ratio will be followed, per the instructor's certification, with a maximum of 6 learners per instructor. An ACA instructor with a qualified assistant may supervise up to 12 learners.

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Planning and Preparation Phase

☐ **Be clear on gear.**
- Review Gear for Canoeing at the end of this section.
- Ask your instructor or outfitter what items are provided.
- Communicate early with participants and families about what the group leader or outfitter will supply and what individuals need to bring.

☐ **Line up first aid.**
- Ensure that at least one adult has First Aid/CPR/AED training.
- For locations more than 30 minutes from emergency medical services, recruit a Wilderness First Aider or Wilderness First Responder. Identify the closest emergency transport and facilities.
- Bring a first aid kit in a waterproof container.

☐ **Assess swimming ability.** Strong swimming skills are important for paddlers' safety and confidence. A swim assessment is highly recommended to evaluate participant readiness.
- Advance swim assessments are recommended to avoid disappointment.
- Same-day assessments may be conducted if necessary.
- If swim assessments are not feasible, assume all participants are non-swimmers.

Day of the Activity

☐ **Check the weather.**
- Consult your instructor; postpone or cancel if conditions are unsuitable for your group's skill level.
- Never canoe during a storm.
- If contact with the water is planned (such as when practicing capsize and recovery), check water quality reports such as on **Surfrider's** interactive map, especially after rainfall.
- Check boats for condition; ensure seats and thwarts are in place and any air bags are functioning and secure.

☐ **Inspect the area upon arrival.** Point out and avoid hazards such as strainers, sieves, hydraulics, waterfalls, bridges, dams, fences, and low power lines. Surf zones, rapids, and standing waves must be avoided unless part of a planned whitewater experience.

☐ **Instructors or lifeguards must be well-positioned for supervision.** Supervision from shore is only allowed on flat water near shore. Instructors must accompany the group if paddling away from shore or on moving rivers.

☐ **Ensure everyone learns and practices the basics.**
- Proper body position and balancing, especially when entering and exiting the canoe
- Launching and landing techniques
- Propelling and steering the canoe with effective strokes
- Maneuvering through waves and wakes
- Self-rescue techniques in case of capsize
- Signaling for help
- Staying seated in fast-moving water
- In whitewater canoeing, how to read and manage rapids, and how to float through if separated from the canoe
- Any site-specific instructions

☐ **Follow canoeing right-of-way rules.**
- Stay clear of swimmers, sailboats, and less maneuverable watercraft.
- Expect powered boats to yield, but stay alert and paddle defensively to prevent accidents.
- Stay clear of large vessels (motorboats, ships, ferries) that cannot easily change course.
- Ask your instructor to demonstrate other right-of-way rules.
- Control your canoe to prevent collisions.

☐ **Prepare for emergencies.**
- Discuss emergency action plans with your instructor.
- Know who to contact and how to call for help.
- Be aware of your location to communicate effectively with authorities.

Canoe Trips: Additional Considerations

Canoe trips are longer day or overnight excursions. Plan canoe trips only after progressive skill-building experiences. Follow these additional tips for a safe and satisfying experience.

☐ **Ensure basic skills.** Make sure that participants:
- Have the skill and stamina to finish the trip, even if headwinds or other challenges arise

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- Learn how to keep boats balanced when loading canoes and how to secure gear
- Learn how to cross busy channels, if necessary (generally, by crossing at a 90-degree angle to channel traffic)
- Learn **universal signals**

☐ **File a float plan for any tripe.**
- Provide a reliable adult with information about your boat(s) and the people aboard.
- This fillable **Coast Guard Float Plan** includes steps for your contact to take if they are concerned about your safety.

☐ **Use a guide who has the additional training** needed for the trip type. Guiding on river, whitewater, coastal, touring, and open water (ocean) trips are advanced certifications.

☐ **See the additional gear needed for trips** under Gear for Canoeing. Consult your guide about what else may be needed.

☐ **Do not exceed capacity or overload boats with gear.**

☐ **Keep boats close enough together** so that a group decision can be made if wind or water conditions change.

☐ **Be aware of possible changes in water level** due to tides or dam releases, and consider how these may impact your route.

Gear for Canoeing

Make sure Girl Scouts have everything they need for a safe and successful canoe outing.

Individual and group essentials

Essential equipment:

- Canoe, suited to participants' skill level and water conditions
  - Canoes 12 feet or less in length are for solo paddlers.
  - Canoes 12–15 feet in length are for two paddlers.
  - Large canoes, like "war canoes," dragon boats, or Hawaiian outriggers, vary in capacity. Do not overload.
- Properly sized paddle for each person
- Bailing scoop or sponge to remove water from hull.

Safety gear

- Coast Guard–approved life jackets, properly sized and fitted for each person (required)
- Rescue whistle
- Throwable personal flotation device (Type IV cushion, ring buoy, or equivalent) available for each group on the water
- Tow line, throw bag, and/or other rescue gear (carried by the instructor)
- Rescue sling, to get participants back into a boat, if needed
- Helmets are required in Class II or higher rapids, or if going in or near sea caves.
- Painter(s)—lines at the bow (and optionally, stern) of the boat, used for securing the canoe. They should be at least half the length of the canoe.
- Canoeing at night requires additional gear; contact your outfitter

Clothing and footwear

- Layered, non-cotton clothing
- Paddling gloves for comfort and grip
- Knee pads or foam mat (optional)

Gear for trips

For trips, consult your expert about what to bring in addition to the gear listed above. They may recommend items such as:

- Navigation items, such as GPS or compass
- Communication tools, such as two-way, satellite, or weather/VHF radios
- Dry bags (and a way to secure them) to carry food, extra clothing, first aid kit, etc.
- Repair kits: duct tape, tools, etc.
- Spare paddle(s)
- Emergency equipment, such as signaling mirror, tarp, space blanket, extra clothing and food, matches, flashlight, etc.

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