Safety Activity Checkpoints (SACs)

Kayaking

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

**Brownies may paddle only on flat water and must stay within swimming distance of shore.
**Juniors may paddle only on flat water within swimming distance of shore, or on sections of river rated Class I.

Kayaking is fun and easy to learn! Whether you're splashing around with friends, touring on a peaceful river, or tackling thrilling whitewater rapids, it's an adventure for all skill levels—and a sport you can enjoy for life.

General Checkpoints

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

Activity-Specific Checkpoints for Kayaking

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**.
- Match skill levels with river conditions by understanding the American version of the **International Scale of River Difficulty.**

Decision-Making Phase

☐ **Find a safe place to kayak.**

- Nearly any body of water is suitable for kayaking with the right instruction, equipment, and experience. Start on flat water with little to no current. Progress to more advanced conditions like whitewater or surf.
- **Paddling.com** and **American Whitewater** have interactive maps of paddling locations.
- Kayaking is not permitted in whitewater above Class III.

☐ **Identify an expert.**

- Arrange for instruction by an adult with experience teaching and supervising kayaking for the ages involved.
- Engage a certified instructor with training suited to your location and conditions:
  - **American Canoe Association** (ACA)—various certification levels
  - American Red Cross Lifeguarding with Waterfront Module (for flat water, near shore only)
  - Documented experience per your council's guidelines
- Maintain proper instructor–student ratio, per the instructor's certification, with a maximum of five learners per instructor. An ACA instructor with a qualified assistant may supervise up to ten learners.
- Ensure instructors have firsthand knowledge of the hazards and conditions at the kayaking location.

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Planning and Preparation Phase

☐ **Be clear on gear.**
- Review Gear for Kayaking 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 kayak during a storm.
- Monitor river or wave conditions, as they change daily. Use resources like **Wannasurf.com** and **Surfline.com** for live updates, or local river conditions resources.
- Check water quality reports on **Surfrider's** interactive map, especially after rainfall.

- **Check boats for condition.** Ensure plugs 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.

☐ **Verify instructors or lifeguards are 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 balance
- Kayak entry, launching, and landing techniques
- Propelling and steering the kayak with effective strokes
- Maneuvering through waves and wakes
- Self-rescue techniques in case of capsize
- Signaling for help

☐ **Consider special conditions.**
- Before padding with decked kayaks, paddlers must learn and successfully practice "wet exits" (escaping the boat if upside down). Practice with spray skirts, if used.
- In surf, learn and practice navigating around the break, as well as recognizing and managing rip currents.
- In whitewater kayaking, learn and practice how to read and manage rapids and how to float through if separated from the kayak.
- Understand and follow any site-specific instructions.

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- ☐ **Follow kayaking right-of-way rules.**
  - Yield to swimmers and less maneuverable watercraft, such as paddleboards.
  - Expect powered watercraft and sailboats 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.
  - Be aware of others in surf zones or whitewater.
  - Control your kayak 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.

Kayak Trips: Additional Considerations

Kayak trips are longer day or overnight excursions. Plan kayaking 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
  - 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 trip.**
  - 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 professional guide with 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 Kayaking. 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 how these may impact your route.

Gear for Kayaking

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

Individual and group essentials

Essential equipment

- Kayak suited to participants' skill level and water conditions
- Beginners: stable, easy-to-paddle, sit-on-top kayak
- Intermediate: decked kayak, built for surf or whitewater
- Advanced: decked kayak with spray skirt for more challenging conditions
- Properly sized, double-bladed paddle
- Bailing scoop to remove water from hull (not needed for self-bailing boats)

Safety gear

- Coast Guard–approved life jacket, 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)
- Helmets (required in Class II or higher rapids, or if going in or near sea caves)
- Kayaking at night requires additional gear; contact your outfitter.

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Clothing and footwear

- Layered, non-cotton clothing; rash guards and board shorts are ideal.
- Water shoes, neoprene booties, or non-slip sport sandals with a heel strap (no flip-flops)
- Wetsuit or neoprene top and shorts if the water temperature is below 65°F
- Paddling gloves for comfort and grip

Gear for trips

For trips, critical gear should be secured to the kayak. 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 equipment 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 kit: duct tape, tools, spare plugs, etc.
- Spare paddle(s)
- Emergency equipment, such as signaling mirror, tarp, space blanket, extra clothing and food, matches, flashlight, etc.

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