

This Good Practice Guide is offered as informal material. It comprises well-intentioned advice but does not obviate the need to pay particular attention to your safety procedures or advanced planning.

Without exception, swimming or paddling in the sea, or a lake, or a river must never be allowed as an impromptu activity. In any case, such activity is included Level 3, for which PRIOR Head and Service Approval is necessary – no leeway is offered. The pleadings of group members, even group leaders, to be allowed to bathe, particularly after a boating exercise or during a hot day, must be resisted when bathing has not been previously approved. Swimming or paddling in the sea should always be adjacent to an otherwise Safe Zone as specified in the Good Practice Guide 1 (Beach visits)

The implication is obvious - you should include bathing in any level 3 or 4 application when it might be a useful or desirable activity. BUT it has to be planned carefully, be properly assessed and carried out in complete safety.

All water activities, including a walk-beside, should take place only after proper risk assessing has been completed and adequate measures have been adopted to control risks and to avoid hazards. Activity of this type must always be run formally and supervised carefully. The excursion leader, or another designated adult in the group, should hold a relevant life saving award, especially where lifeguard cover may not be available.

Group leaders must always try to find recognised bathing areas that have official surveillance and qualified lifeguard cover. Even then, group leaders should be aware that group members might mingle with the public and be lost to view. Group members should always be in sight and in reasonable reach of their leaders.

Given that leaders are prepared for the activity, then they must -

- be aware that many youngsters, even leaders, who have drowned were strong swimmers and sometimes in very shallow water;
- ascertain for themselves the level of each group member's water awareness & swimming ability;
- check the weather, particularly for off-shore winds;
- check for any local conditions – such as currents, weeds, rips, a shelving, uneven or unstable bottom (sources, when available - lifeguard, coastguard, harbourmaster, police or tourist information office);
- check and brief for submerged or slippery rocks, breakwaters and other potential hazards;
- observe for warning signs and flags -
a **red flag** means it is unsafe to swim; **yellow flags** mean that lifeguards are on patrol in the area between the flags, a **black and white flag** means it is an area used by surfers and is not suitable for swimming;
- specifically designate and define an area of water for use by the group;
- avoid operating anywhere near weirs, waterfalls or fast streams;
- avoid crowded beaches where it is harder to see youngsters;
- be aware of the dangers of paddling, even in shallow water, especially to young children;
- ensure that group members have not eaten for at least half an hour before swimming;
- ensure the activity is suitable for those with relevant support needs or disabilities;
- adopt and explain the signals for help and recall;
- ensure that buoyancy aids, lifejackets etc. are always used when and where appropriate;
- consider carrying a life-line and practise using it;
- carry out regular head counts (appoint an adult whose role this is).

Leaders should -

- have clear roles – at least one leader should always stay out of the water for better surveillance, even where lifeguards are on duty;
- set up a signal/communication system using arm signals;
- take up a *best position* from which to exercise constant vigilance;
- consider appointing someone to stand in the water to look landward towards the group;
- give the group their full, undivided attention;
- always follow the advice or directions of a lifeguard;
- never swim themselves (with the group) unless it is to help someone in distress;
- ensure that no-one is allowed to wade or swim further than his or her waist height;
- be aware that it is possible to drown well within one's own depth;
- act immediately when someone appears to be in difficulties;
- warm group members to leave the water immediately, if they get cold;
- recognise that someone in difficulty is unlikely to wave or shout.

The model for this document and other very useful material can be found via
<http://www.thegrid.org.uk/info/healthandsafety/>

For further advice contact *The Royal Lifesaving Society UK, River House, High St, Broom, Warwickshire B50 4HN (Tel: 01789 773994)*
www.lifesavers.org.uk/

A single page of life saving information from the Fire Service
<http://www.fireservice.co.uk/safety/watersafety.php>

Loads of valuable links from the National Water Safety Forum
<http://www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/>

An excellent link to Children's safety packs via the RNLI
http://www.rnli.org.uk/who_we_are/news/news_detail?articleid=102222

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