

Kayaking: Safety Activity Checkpoints



Kayaks come in a variety of styles and sizes, and like canoes are almond-shaped and powered by paddling. Kayaks tend to be smaller than canoes, sometimes covered by a deck and spray skirt, and seat one or two kayakers who sit with legs extended in front of them. Kayakers almost always use a two-bladed paddle. Beginners should be careful of overexertion, as girls who are not accustomed to using paddles may experience strained arm muscles. Kayaking is not allowed for Girl Scout Daisies. Girl Scouts of any age are never allowed Class III and above whitewater.

Caution: You must seek council permission for activities with uncontrollable and highly changeable environment conditions, such as unclassified rivers and some watercraft trips. Girls are never allowed on Class III and above whitewater.

Know where to go kayaking. Just about any body of water (lake, stream, river or ocean) is suitable for kayaking, as long as the proper equipment, instructions and safety precautions are used. Kayaking is done only on water that has been approved by your Girl Scout council or that has been run and rated. For whitewater, only Class I & II difficulty, as defined by the American Version of the [International Scale of River Difficulty](#) may be used for kayaking. The [American Whitewater Association](#) provides information about American and some international river locations, classes and levels. Connect with your Girl Scout council for site suggestions.

Include girls with disabilities. Communicate with girls with disabilities and/or their caregivers to assess any needs and accommodations. Learn more about the paddle ability resources and information that the [International Canoe Federation](#) and [British Canoe Union](#) provide to people with disabilities.

Kayaking Gear

Required Gear

- U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jacket. Type III life jackets are recommended and should fit according to weight and height specifications. Inspect life jackets to ensure that they are in good condition and contain no tears. Read about Coast Guard life jackets [here](#).
- Kayak appropriately sized for the person using it, with an adjustable bracing system for the feet and bow and stern grab loops. Each kayak is outfitted with proper flotation. If used, air bags are checked before trips to ensure that the seals are intact. Float bags, if used, should be secured to the kayak
- A safety helmet with flexible, strong, plastic shell and chin strap, as well as openings for drainage should be worn when using a decked kayak or when kayaking in waters that are Class II rated.
- Emergency sound device, such as a whistle, compressed air horn, or VHF radio on navigable waters. Paddles that are of the [appropriate size and style](#) for the activity and person using them. For most children 14 years and under, paddles of 180 CM are optimum. Extras should be kept on hand.

Recommended Gear

- Layered clothing that's easily changeable depending on temperatures (waterproof jacket and pants recommended)**
- Change of dry clothing (store in waterproof bag secured to kayak)**
- Boat shoes, closed-toe hiking/sport sandals with heel strap, water socks or shoes, or other nonslip footwear (no flip-flops). If using decked kayaks with foot pegs, sandals and shoes with laces should be avoided as there is the possibility of them becoming caught on the foot pegs.**
- Waterproof sunscreen (SPF of at least 15), apply every two hours.**
- Lip balm**
- Sunglasses with retainer strap**
- Emergency repair kit: duct tape or electrical tape, screwdriver, pliers**
- Compass and chart of the area (for each adult)**
 - Rescue sling used to get paddlers back into a canoe
- Protective clothing is recommended when the water temperature is below 70 degrees.
 - Flashlight (and extra batteries)
 - Bailer (a bucket or sponge that can be used to remove water from a boat), secured to the kayak.
 - Spray skirt with release loop (provides a water-resistant seal around the waist; optional)
- Emergency survival packet: raincoat, waterproof matches, lightweight/space blanket, hat, raincoat, pocket knife, minimum of 10 X 10 tarp, rope, drinking cup, food and appropriate liquids. Food and water bottles should be secured in the kayak**
- Waist mounted tow system (lightweight nylon, polypropylene, or 50- to 100-pound monofilament fishing line) is carried for every three to four kayaks.
- Each adult carries a paddle, a first-aid kit, a repair kit, and standard safety equipment, including signaling equipment and an inflatable paddle float—a solid

block of foam or inflatable nylon attached to a paddle that may be used as an outrigger for self-rescue.

Prepare for Kayaking

- Communicate with council and parents.** See *the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints*.
- Girls plan the activity.** See *the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints*.
- Ensure participants are able to swim.** Participants' swimming abilities are classified and clearly identified (for instance, with colored headbands to signify beginners, advanced swimmers, etc.) at council-approved sites, or participants provide proof of swimming-test certification. In the absence of swimming-test certification, a swim test is conducted before or on the day of the activity. Consult with your Girl Scout council for additional guidance.
- Arrange for transportation and adult supervision.** See *the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints for the recommended adult-to-girl ratio*.
 - Verify instructor knowledge and experience.** Ensure that the skill level of the adults is higher than the difficulty of the intended activity. For each of the following types of kayaking, one adult must hold either:
 - **American Red Cross Small Craft Safety certification (Kayaking and Moving Water modules, if on moving water), or**
 - **One of the following certifications appropriate for the activity, or equivalent certification or documented experience according to your council's guidelines, as outlined in *Volunteer Essentials***
- River and whitewater kayaking.** River Kayaking Instructor certification from the American Canoe Association. Appropriate level of instructor based on the activity and location. Ratio of instructor to participant is 1 to 5 or 1 to 10 with a qualified assistant.
- Sea/surf kayaking.** Coastal Kayaking Instructor from the American Canoe Association. Appropriate level of instructor based on the activity and location. For sea kayaking, the adult is familiar with water and weather conditions and in tidal areas is aware of tidal fluctuations, currents, and wind patterns that may accompany tide changes. The ratio of instructor to participant is 1 to 4 or 1 to 8 with a qualified assistant.
- Kayaking in a pond or lake.** The ratio of instructor to participant is 1 to 5 or 1 to 10 with a qualified assistant:
 - **American Canoe Association:** level 1 or above Coastal Kayak Instructor. Appropriate level of instructor based on the activity and location.
 - **American Red Cross:** Small Craft Safety - Kayak
- *Select a safe kayak site.** Trips are not taken to unknown coastal areas, and locations of all boat channels are known and avoided. Kayaking is not permitted further than one mile from the nearest shore. Also make sure of the following:
 - Busy channels are avoided when possible, and crossed carefully when necessary.
 - Surf zones and areas with standing waves are avoided.
 - On long passages, kayaks are close enough together so that a group decision can be made if wind and water conditions change.

NOTE: The instructor-to-participant ratio is NOT the same as the adult-to-girl ratio that is found in the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints. Both ratios MUST be complied with when girls are participating in kayaking. For example, if there are 15 Juniors participating in kayaking, there must be 3 instructors plus 2 adult Girl Scout volunteers (who are not instructors).

- **Transport kayaks safely.** Kayaks are transported on car-top racks or trailers designed to haul kayaks. Kayaks are secured with two lines across the top and a line at the bow and the stern. Drivers must have prior experience hauling trailers.
- **Compile key contacts.** Give an itinerary to a contact person at home; call the contact person upon departure and return. Create a list of girls' parents/guardian contact information, telephone numbers for emergency services and police, and council contacts—keep on hand or post in an easily accessible location.
- ***Research water conditions and select kayaks appropriate to skill level.** Consider weather and water conditions, weight of passengers, and equipment. Also make sure of the following:
 - Craft weight and capacity are not exceeded (some crafts clearly display maximum capacity).
 - Each kayak is sized for the person using it.
 - You are knowledgeable of the difficulty of the water run and the [International Scale of River Difficulty](#).
 - You are aware of possible changes in river level and weather and [their effects](#) on the run's level of difficulty.
- **Respect the environment.** Make sure kayaking on whitewater or semi-protected waters meets the [Safety Code of American Whitewater](#).
- **File a float plan.** If participating in a long-distance kayak trip, it is recommended that a float plan be completed and filed (left) with a person knowledgeable about the trip and when to expect the party back. Float plans cannot be filed with the U.S. Coast Guard. The USCG float plan is available [here](#) and should be used for all float plans.
- **Prepare for emergencies.** If a lifeguard is not on duty, an adult with rescue and resuscitation experience and/or certification is present; at least one adult has [small-craft safety certification](#) or equivalent experience (both of these qualifications can be held by one person). Ensure the presence of a waterproof first-aid kit and a first-aider with a current certificate in First Aid, including Adult and Child CPR or CPR/AED, who is prepared to handle cases of near-drowning, immersion hypothermia, and sunburn. If participating in whitewater kayaking or an overnight trip, or if any part of the activity is located 30 minutes or more from emergency medical services, ensure the presence of a first-aider with Wilderness First Aid. See [Volunteer Essentials](#) for information about first-aid standards and training.
- **If using decked kayaks.** All paddlers *must* be trained on how to perform a wet exit and execute one before being allowed to paddle on decked kayak. If spray skirts are used, wet exits must be performed before the outing can begin with spray skirts attached.
- ***Know the Universal River Signals.** The adult and/or kayak instructor understands the [American Whitewater codes](#). Also, a set of whistle and visual signals is established that allows messages to pass between kayaks.

- ❑ **Kayaking participants know cold-water survival techniques and treatment for hypothermia.** Each person practices appropriate self-rescue and reentry techniques. (Basic information is available on the [U.S. Search and Rescue Task Force site.](#))

On the Day of Kayaking

- ❑ **Get a weather report.** Never kayak on a stormy day. On the day of the activity, visit [weather.com](#), [Intellicast](#), or other reliable sources to assess weather conditions, water temperature, and river/wave conditions. If weather conditions prevent the trip, be prepared with a backup plan or alternative activity.
- ❑ **Review rescue tips.** Know how to [right a tipped kayak](#) and other self and assisted rescue techniques.
- ❑ **Use the buddy system.** See *the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints*.
- ❑ **Be prepared in the event of a storm with lightning.** Exit water immediately and take shelter away from tall objects (including trees, buildings, and electrical poles). Find the lowest point in an open flat area. Squat low to the ground on the balls of the feet, and place hands on knees with head between them. During storms, if shore cannot be reached, secure all loose gear, keep a sharp lookout for other boats and obstructions, and stay low.

Kayaking Links

- **American Canoe Association:** [www.americancanoe.org](#)
- **American Whitewater:** [www.americanwhitewater.org](#)
- **International Canoe Federation:** [www.canoeicf.com](#)
- **National Organization for River Sports:** [www.nationalrivers.org](#)
- **U.S. Coast Guard's Boating Safety Division:** [www.uscgboating.org](#)
- **Whitewater Rescue Institute:** [www.whitewaterrescue.com](#)

Kayaking Know-How for Girls

- **Learn about the different types of kayaks.** Information on the major categories of kayaks can be found [here](#).

***These checkpoints must be reviewed with the vendor and/or facility, when appropriate.**