

Special Needs

Swimming Strategies for Scouts with Disabilities

Every willing Scout should have an opportunity to get into the water and have fun. Many swimming area hours get dedicated to advancement-related activities like merit badges, Cub Scout Adventures, and special award opportunities like snorkel, scuba, and mile swim. However, **opportunities for recreational time in the water are especially important for Scouts with disabilities** so they can enjoy camp, try new things, and cool off on hot days.

Some Scouts have disabilities that are obvious, like physical disabilities, blind, deaf, or Down syndrome. Physical disabilities include people who need mobility equipment like wheelchairs and crutches, but also include people that have limited strength, endurance, or coordination. For every obvious disability you encounter, there will be several Scouts with less obvious special needs like learning disabilities, ADHD, autism, history of seizures, 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. Young swimmers may need extra support and consideration even though they are not disabled and do not have an identified special need.

SWIM CHECK STRATEGIES

Communication— Unit leaders that bring Scouts with disabilities to swim check should talk to the Swim Area Director beforehand. The leaders can identify for the swim area director, Scouts with known disabilities or needs. Tell what types of accommodations you think are needed and how the staff can help.

Parent/Caregiver Communication— It is not unusual for a parent, family member, or caregiver to attend camp with the Scout with a disability and to be at swim check. This is a good time for the unit leadership to ask what the family thinks the individual goals are for their child when it comes to swimming. Even if the caregiver is used to physically supporting the Scout in the water, encourage the Scout to bring a similar age buddy to the swim area for the fun and social aspects of swimming. Three-person buddy groups with two Scouts and a caregiver are fine. Let the Swim Area Director know and in turn their staff can be alerted.

Non-swimmers— Some Scouts will not want to attempt the swim test and plan to be non-swimmers. This should be relayed to the staff. Remind the Scouts that they don't have to be able to swim to come to the swim area and play in the water. Encourage them to come for instructional swim time and learn. Encourage them to dangle their feet in the water while the others are doing swim tests. Not only does this let them cool off, it gives unit leaders and the Swim staff a way to identify Scouts that have sensory issues and are unable to be in the water at all. Again, the parent/guardian/caregiver can alert the leadership so those at poolside can give an extra effort in helping the Scout enjoy the experience.

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OPERATING STRATEGIES

Early Start and Departure—A person who uses a wheelchair or crutches will need some help to get in and out of the water because the equipment needs to be moved to the water's edge to enter and then be moved away to have a clear walkway around the swim area. This situation is easier to manage if these swim area users are allowed to get into the area before the general group is released to get in the water, similar to pre-boarding on an airline flight. Some Scouts with sensory noise challenges can benefit from this as well. As a counterpart, it is also a good idea to assist them by giving them a head start at the end of a swimming period so they can move away from the water, move their buddy tags, and get into the changing areas before the walkways get crowded with exiting swimmers. Discuss this with the Swim Director and staff beforehand if this is an issue for your Scout(s).

Managing Waves & Splashing— There are some Scouts that will find the splashing and wave action in a crowded area at open swim time to be distressing, either because they have limited mobility to protect their faces or have sensory issues with noise or being surprised by water hitting their faces. Find out what the over-all swim schedule is, and work with the staff so they can accommodate for these Scouts by allowing them to have recreational water time alongside the instructional swim class or a smaller merit badge/adventure/award class.

Visit Section BB-1 of the Inclusion Toolbox, with a link on the Scouting website, <https://www.scouting.org/resources/disabilities-awareness/> for more details on many strategies covering Scout Swim areas at our camps.