



Natural Water Bathing

For the purpose of this guidance, “Natural Water Bathing” is defined as *“swimming or paddling, in river, canal, sea or lake”*. This document should be read alongside the following documents in this Guidance:

- Swimming Pools.
- “Group Safety at Water Margins” (DfES/CCPR 2005).

Taking young people on a trip to the seaside in good weather, and then not allowing them to at least paddle or cool off in the water, would seem unfair and inappropriately risk-averse. There is a range of activity from paddling (water below knee level) in a shallow splash pool, or sitting chatting in shallow water at the edge of a lake or sea, where the purpose of the activity is to cool off, to swimming well out of one’s depth or body surfing in the waves.

Involving young people in well organised and supervised swimming or paddling in natural waters can provide a great opportunity to develop their awareness of water safety, choice of swimming area and safe conduct while swimming. Such opportunities are important because swimming and paddling in natural waters present real risks: around 400 people drown every year. The most effective way to reduce the risk of young people drowning is to teach them to swim, giving them the skills to make sound judgements about playing in and around natural waters.

Clearly the risks to be managed will differ for paddling in clear calm shallow water compared to those for swimming in deep water. But it is important to recognise that the risks involved in any use of natural water should be carefully assessed.

Natural water bathing should always be a robustly planned activity with a fresh look at any risk assessment or operating procedure each time it is undertaken. It should never be allowed as an impromptu group activity, unless the group leader is absolutely clear that there are no significant risks. The pleas of young people to be allowed to bathe within the context of another activity (e.g. because it is hot weather) must never be allowed to influence the leader’s judgement of the situation.

It is good practice that, wherever reasonably practicable, Visit Leaders should seek out recognised bathing areas that have qualified lifeguard cover. Even then, they should be aware that young people might mingle with members of the public and be lost to view. In natural water bathing, young people should always be in sight and within reasonable reach of those supervising them. It is essential that supervisors always know how many young people are in the water and where

they are. A number of young people on educational visits have drowned in shallow water because leaders did not keep track of where they were.

The Visit Leader should assess the risks, taking into account the group, the staff available and the venue, and decide on an appropriate safe supervision level and plan for their particular group before the activity takes place. This plan should be communicated to all other supervisors and participants.

At least one person within the supervision team should be appropriately competent in life saving and resuscitation. Appropriate competence means being able to deal with the worst-case scenario in your chosen environment. For example, when paddling or cooling off in contained shallow waters, or at a beach when the sea is calm and there is no risk of anyone getting out of their depth or encountering currents or underwater hazards, this may simply involve a suitable first aid qualification. When close to or entering a fast flowing stream or river, a supervisor may require experience and skills in white water safety and rescue. When it is possible for someone to get out of their depth, then 'in-water' lifesaving skills may be required. In the last two cases, competence should be verified by a relevant qualification, or by evidence of sufficient training and experience assessed by a competent technical adviser.

Choosing a venue

It is important that leaders consider the following factors:

- Access and egress points to and from the water.
- Depth, temperature and clarity of water.
- Any currents and tides (be particularly aware of the possibility of rip tides).
- The nature of the bottom e.g. weeds, quicksand, decayed groynes, a shelving, uneven or unstable bottom.
- Water quality/pollution.
- Prevailing weather conditions.
- Lines of sight.
- Useful markers for designating the limits of the area to be used
- Other water users.
- Local advice from, for example, a lifeguard, coastguard, harbourmaster, police or tourist information office.
- Other hazards (for example country-specific marine hazards such as jelly fish and weaver fish in the UK).

Managing the activity

Leaders should:

- ascertain for themselves the level of the participants' swimming ability.
- ensure the activity is suitable for the group, especially any with special needs or disabilities.
- at the beach look out 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 not suitable for swimming.

- brief the group about the limits of the bathing area.
- consider marking the bathing area themselves, for example with a rope or buoys.
- adopt and explain signals of distress and recall.
- carry out regular and frequent head counts.
- have clear roles within the supervision plan – at least one supervisor should always stay out of the water for better surveillance, even where lifeguards are on duty.
- take up a best position from which to exercise a constant vigilance.
- divide supervision between staff who are in the water and looking landward towards the group, and staff who stay on land and watch the group from that vantage point.
- give the participants their full, undivided attention.
- be prepared to act immediately when a participant appears to be in difficulties.
- be aware that a participant in difficulty may not wave or shout – all of their energies could be focussed on trying to keep afloat.
- follow the advice or directions of an official lifeguard.
- avoid swimming themselves - unless it is to help a person in distress.
- avoid joining in with the group's water-based games.
- ensure that participants leave the water if they complain of getting cold, especially if toes and fingers look blue or feel numb (this could suggest the onset of hypothermia).

Everyone should know:

- that many young people who drown are strong swimmers.
- that sudden immersion in cold water can be very dangerous.

Other Activities

Jumping and diving, as from sea cliffs or gorge environments, should be treated as a specialist adventure activity and be managed accordingly. The Activity Leader should be assessed as specifically competent to lead these activities.

Use of throw-lines

Throw-lines in the hands of a trained and competent leader can have a significant impact on reducing the risk of drowning. However, they can create a false sense of security in the hands of someone who is not well-practised in their use, and training with this rescue tool needs to be undertaken.

