Paddlesport Safety
On and Off the Water

TRR Adaptive Paddling Conference
Chapter Leadership
J. Riley -June 2015

Assumed Risk

There are risks to life and limb involved in paddlesports and participants are required to assume responsibility for their own safety.

Training, preparation, caution and common-sense can minimize, but not eliminate these risks. The ACA and DSUSA Waiver & Release of Liability agreements state this and participants are required to sign and understand.

Where Safety Starts

**Personal Responsibility:** The INDIVIDUAL - Are you ready in mind, body and gear? Rested, fit, clear-headed, nourished, equipment secure and ready.

**Teamwork:** Working together in GROUPS provides improved eyes-on and assistance while sharing equipment, resources and communication.

**TRR Chapter Volunteers:** Recruit value added instructors, experienced boaters, first-aid certified or experienced in leadership.
Paddlesport Injuries

It’s not an amusement park ride!

Acute Trauma / Impact / Crush:
Contusion: bruising
Puncture and laceration
Bone/cartilage: break, fracture, spinal
Joints: dislocation

Overuse / Strain:
Muscle: strain, pull, tear
Abrasion: blisters, scrapes
Joints: shoulder, wrist, elbow, ankle
Fatigue / exhaustion

Submersion:
Drowning (or near)
Eyes/sinuses: infection, vision
Ears: infection, eardrum damage
Ingest: toxins, parasites

Environmental:
Hypothermia: cold air/water
Hyperthermia: hot sun/exhaustion
Allergic reaction
Poisonous plants/insects/animals

The Individual Paddler....

...reduces risk of injury to him/her self by:

- Practicing & improving paddling skills.
- Warm-up / stretching / gradual exertion.
- PFD/helmet worn and secured at all times.
- Knowing safe paddling techniques: Engage torso, shoulder protection, proper boat-carry and lifting of gear.
- Having an honest assessment of paddling skills related to water difficulty.
- Bringing sufficient water, food, medication.
- Preparing for sun/bug protection: sunscreen, hat, repellent.
- Understanding of river features and hazards: eddies, currents, hydraulics, ledges, undercut rocks, strainers, low-head dams, waves and tides.
- Dress in appropriate clothing layers for water temperature / swimming.
- Never paddle alone. Chances of survival improves dramatically when another set of eyes are on you!
- Checking all personal gear for reliability well before trip.
Personal Gear Checklist

✓ **Boat Hull:** No cracks, seat/fitting in good shape, screws tightened. No leaks.
✓ **Smooth wet exit:** Boat interior & clothing free of snags, gear, outfitting, shoelaces.
✓ **Airbags:** Installed and inflated.
✓ **Water bottle(s):** Clean/filled and food packed.
✓ **PFD:** Fit is correct, flotation correct for weight.
✓ **River knife:** Clean, sharp and secure.
✓ **Skirt:** Not torn, grab-loop secure, proper fit.
✓ **Paddle:** No cracks or sharp/chipped edges.
✓ **Helmet:** Shell and straps in good shape, proper fit.
✓ **Communication:** Mobile phone, VHF radio or Sat. phone.
✓ **Whistle:** Securely attached. Know when to use it.
✓ **Rescue gear:** Throw/tow/rope bag ready for use, locking carabiners, pin kit.
✓ **First aid kit:** Is appropriate for trip with fresh supplies.
✓ **Eye protection:** Sunglasses or Rx eyewear with strap. Spare set if poor vision.
✓ **Extra:** Breakdown / spare paddle.
✓ **Paddle Clothing:** Appropriate for water temperature / potential swim.
✓ **Repairs:** Duct tape, para-cord, foam

Paddling In Groups

...increases safety by:

- Shared knowledge and skills of experienced paddlers.
- Additional muscle and equipment resources available if needed in a rescue.
- More 'eyes' on river to spot potential hazards and safety issues.
- Improved communication: As river conditions change, knowledge can be passed.
Group Safety Basics

✓ Minimum group size is 3 boats - ideal minimum is 4. If someone is injured, there would be 1 to stay with the injured person, and 2 to get help (if needed). Never send someone down river by themselves to find help.

✓ A group leader and sweep paddler should be designated. All paddlers in the group aware of their role.

✓ Balance of skilled support to novice: For a training group, the average ACA recommended ratio of participants to instructors is 5 : 1. For adaptive paddling, the ratio can vary to 1 : 2 depending on support needed.

Paddling groups consist of:

- Group leader
- Middle boats (novice /support mixed)
- Sweep boater
The Group Leader

- Is calm and vigilant
- Recruits support boaters – balances paddle and “people” skills.
- Encourages. Knows when to apply comedy relief, tease, instruct and lavish praise.
- Is capable of saying "No" – error on the side of safety/caution.
- Should be ready to acknowledge if water/weather conditions compromise safety and cancel or postpone trip.
- Possess solid river/water-reading skills and selects routes that are within the capability of the least-skilled members of the group.
- If trip is near shipping lanes or power boats, is aware of required distances.
- Monitors and adjusts pace, senses when breaks are needed.
- Is friendly, upbeat and respectful to inspire confidence. Confidence improves attention to instructions and safety.
- Assures distribution of rescue gear, first aid, food, water, extra clothing, repair kit.
- Knows and points out portage options (where available).
- For large groups, acknowledges when it is necessary to divide into sub-groups for better management and safety. Sub-groups can leapfrog each other for safety.
- Already has an idea which support boaters could be asked to assist/walk out a victim without compromising safety of group.

The Sweep Boater

- Should be a strong paddler, experienced in rescue and always vigilant for problems.
- Carries a first-aid kit and rescue equipment.
- Does not pass other members of the group unless there is an emergency.
- Actively works to keep the group compact (sheep-dogging).
**All Group Members**
...are responsible for:

- Personal safety: Boat, helmet, PFD and gear are fitted, connected and secured.
- Keeping group compact - paddler in front and behind in sight without passing.
- Avoid crowding small eddies. Always consider "Plan B" if where you are heading appears unsafe.
- Communicate messages to other group members quickly - 'echo' verbal, hand and paddle signals.
- Should be encouraged to train/carry first-aid kit and rescue equipment.
- Should communicate concerns quickly to a support boater or Group Leader.

**Disability / Mobility Considerations**

- Know the individual capabilities and if support people are needed.
- Visual impairment: Practice audible signals and explicit instructions.
- Spinal Injury - style of boat and gear selection:
  1. Comfort - eliminate or pad sharp edges and compression points
  2. Easy transfer in / out (decked boat, inflatable kayak, raft?)
  3. Sufficient torso support / comfort.
  4. No attachment or connection to boat.
  5. Personal flotation / PFD fit to assist extract
  6. Extract / carry aids such as sling

- Practice/simulate moving person from bank to shore in pool or flat water.
- Be knowledgeable on available extract points.
- Plan for wheelchair / prosthetics / support waiting at take-out.
Off Water Planning

Before trip or clinic Trip Coordinator considerations:

- Set policy to discourage "last-minute" joiners of group to prevent unplanned risks in skill balance.
- Stress meet-up location/time. Safety issue because late arrivals miss put-in briefing and are hurried.
- Offer vehicle tie-down tips on boats/gear.
- Consider number of vehicles and boat carry capacity.
- Ask support boaters to bring rope-bags/rescue gear, 1st aid kit, mobile phone, break-down paddle.
- Ask participants to verify their boats/equipment are in reliable order.
- Confidential talk with individuals about challenges or concerns. Leader informs support boaters off-line to keep eyes-on. Preserve dignity.
- Inform personal basics to bring: Water, food, sunscreen, toilet-paper, extra river clothing and proper footwear (no bare feet).
- Medications: Ask individuals to bring two waterproof sets -one with participant, one with an instructor.
- Monitor / anticipate water levels and weather / temperature.
- Consider buddy-up options and ratio -who are strong support boaters and who are beginner / weak paddlers. Who not to pair up.
- Know emergency extraction points or access to road/trail. Phone numbers of emergency support with mobile phone.
- If trip is remote, inform a reliable source of your Paddle/Float Plan: where, when, camping location, expected times arrive / depart, take-out.
- Monitor / anticipate water levels and weather / temperature.
- Consider buddy-up options and ratio -who are strong support boaters and who are beginner / weak paddlers. Who not to pair up.
- Know emergency extraction points or access to road/trail. Phone numbers of emergency support with mobile phone.
- If trip is remote, inform a reliable source of your Paddle/Float Plan: where, when, camping location, expected times arrive / depart, take-out.
Put-In Safety Check

- Dynamic s-t-r-e-t-c-h to warm-up muscles -can do during the briefing.
- Verify each member is dressed appropriately for the weather/water including footwear.
- Assign appropriately skilled buddies to watch each other.
- Have buddies cross-check each other on boat and equipment fits: PFD, helmet, skirt and boat fit.
- Designate boat order and interval -who follows who and how far apart. Less experienced paddlers placed near the front or directly behind support boaters:
  - The route chosen by the leader is more obvious to paddlers close to him/her.
  - Rescue usually comes from up stream (the back of the group).
  - River communication -make certain everyone knows paddle and hand signals.
  - Establish who is carrying: mobile phone, first aid kit, rope/throw bags, breakdown paddle, extra food/water/clothing.
- Provide environment information -water flow, potential or known hazards, access roads, lunch and take-out landmarks.
- Review self-rescue: stay tucked, feet-up and downstream. Follow instructions of your rescuer.
- Make group aware who the support/rescue boaters are.
- Remind: First responsibility of rescue: DO NOT DOUBLE THE NUMBER OF VICTIMS!
  1. Establish who should participate in rescues:
  2. Novice: secure self, use whistle, point to a victim.
  3. Support boater (ability to roll and rescue) priority: victim, boat, paddle.
- Stress that other paddlers may be placed at risk during rescues.
- No paddler leaves the group without checking with leader / support boater.
- Inform all to keep helmet/PFD on and snapped when getting out of boat. Use paddle to walk.
- Establish eyes-on protocol to try maneuvers or surfing.
- Everyone... each time you get back in a boat, check: Helmet fastened? PFD zipped/closed? Skirt grab-loop out? Drain-plug in?
- Check your buddy and other group members for same.
On-Water Practices

- Provide adequate warm-up and opportunities for confidence building.
- When in doubt – SCOUT! Explain route options and locations clearly with visual references - also at water level.
- Decide before decent into a rapid: Who is taking which route?
- Offer opportunities to portage (if available) and advise of potential risk of portage versus risk of paddling rapid.
- Point and speak in the positive.

- Identify shoreline hazards during breaks (poison ivy, snakes, gators, ice, mud)
- Maintain "interval" (distance in boat-lengths).
- Preset rescue at potential risk areas (rope-bags or chase boaters).
- Position support boaters within a rapid for reference points and fast rescue.
- May be useful to descend one paddler at a time, use paddle signals or leapfrog.
- Information Overload: Don’t throw out 10 instructions if they can only remember 3!

Examples:
1. Don’t stop t paddling (Humor: describe the "pre-flip position")
2. Maintain aggressive posture (Forward lean, engage torso. Make every stroke count).
3. Ask yourself, “Where is the water going? What is "Plan B?"
Take-Out Practices

✓ If take-out is in or near moving water or cannot fit all boaters: Descend single-file, use paddle signals, after exiting boat make room, guide next boater.
✓ Everyone is rubber-legged and tired after spending hours in a kayak. Assist each other getting out, carrying/secureing boats and putting on vehicles.
✓ Hydrate, dry-off / warm-up.
✓ Gentle static s-t-r-e-t-c-h-i-n-g will help prevent cramping later.
✓ Wrapup Talk: Review what went well, what did not and what could be done better next time to improve safety or confidence.

Novice Safety Questions

What would you do?

1. While paddling a rapid, you notice that a boater ahead of you is swimming.
2. Your boat flips and you are swimming in moving water.
3. After an hour on the river, you realize that you need to let out that quart of orange juice that you drank at the put-in.
4. The leader has stopped the group to explain the next rapid. Your stomach begins churning and you feel yourself trembling.
5. You’re on a bend of a river and a boater ahead of you holds up her paddle horizontally.
6. Just upstream from a rapid, you spot an awesome wave and want to ‘go for it.’
**Panicked Paddler Tips**

- Cold feeds fear. If paddler is cold, it is difficult to know their fear level. First priority is to warm them up with sun, movement, dry clothing or warm beverage.

- Speak calmly and encouragingly. Relate to their anxiety. Do not berate or hurry.

- Offer praise: It’s admirable to admit when anxiety or fear is getting the best of you. It takes strength to admit and ask others to assist.

- B-r-e-a-t-h-e and refocus: Remind that they are in a beautiful and unique place.

- Laugh!! Humor helps break tension.

- Assign an extra paddle buddy or different buddy.

- Advise portage of more difficult areas with support boater(s) assisting

- Raft-Up descent of rapid technique (class II) : Support boaters on each side of panicked boater and hold together through rapid.

- Make the call... If panic or anxiety compromises safety of paddler or others, evacuate.
American Canoe Association - Top 10 Safety Tips
http://www.americancanoe.org/?page=top_10

Safety Code of American Whitewater
http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Wiki/safety:start

American Canoe Association - Paddlers Safety Checklist

American Canoe Association - Best Practices

American Canoe Association - Guidelines for Safe Coastal Kayaking

American Canoe Association - Top 10 Safety Tips
http://www.americancanoe.org/?page=top_10

Safety Code of American Whitewater
http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Wiki/safety:start

American Canoe Association - Paddlers Safety Checklist

American Canoe Association - Best Practices

American Canoe Association - Guidelines for Safe Coastal Kayaking