



BSA SAFETY MOMENT

LIFE JACKETS/PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICES

SUMMARY

A common misconception in the world of water is that life jackets and other types of personal flotation devices (PFDs) are only necessary for nonswimmers. But in both swimming and boating, U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jackets and PFDs can be the difference between having a fun time in and on the water and having it be your last time in the water.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Swimming

Scouts BSA groups use the Safe Swim Defense, the best practices for all swimming activities. This includes the following principle for use of life jackets when swimming in

- clear water over 12 feet deep,
- turbid water—when a swimmer treading water cannot see their feet—over 8 feet deep, or
- flowing water.

Safe Swim Defense standards apply at all BSA swim activities, including:

- backyard, hotel, apartment, and public pools;
- established waterfront swim areas such as beaches at state parks and Army Corps of Engineers lakes; and
- all temporary swimming areas such as a lake, river, or ocean.

Safe Swim Defense also applies whenever participants enter water over knee deep or when submersion is likely, e.g., when fording a stream, seining for bait, or constructing a bridge as a pioneering project.

Boating

Where causes of death among boating fatalities in 2017 are known, **76 percent** of the victims drowned, according to the United States Coast Guard. In cases where it is known whether or not life jackets were in use, **84.5 percent of the victims were not wearing life jackets, and two-thirds of the victims** were reportedly good swimmers.

Scouts BSA groups also follow Safety Afloat guidelines for all boating activities. **These guidelines require life jackets be worn by everyone in boating activities including rowing, canoeing, sailing, boardsailing, motorboating, waterskiing, rafting, tubing, and kayaking.** Type III life jackets are recommended for general recreational use. For vessels over 20 feet in length, life jackets are not required to be worn when below deck or on deck when the qualified supervisor aboard the vessel determines that it is prudent to abide by less-restrictive state and federal regulations; these might apply, for example, when a cruising vessel with safety rails is at anchor. However, all participants who are not classified as swimmers must wear a life jacket when on deck and the ship is underway.

The Proper-Fitting Life Jacket

Your life jacket fits when you put your arms up in the air and the jacket does not rise to your ears. If it does, you need to find a smaller life jacket that fits. It will make the difference in an emergency.

RESOURCES

- Guide to Safe Scouting Aquatics: www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss02/
- National Safe Boating Council—Get the Facts: www.safeboatingcampaign.com/get-the-facts/
- U.S. Coast Guard—Accident Statistics: http://uscgboating.org/statistics/accident_statistics.php