

Building Blocks to In-Service Aquatic Training by Cathy Scheder

NOTE: References to Standards Numbers are based on the 1998 Edition of the Standards. While the intent of the standard has not changed, the number has potentially changed.

Camp programs are unique in the aquatics realm. Unlike many aquatic venues, camps have multifaceted programs reaching outside the confines of a pool environment. Programs, such as swimming, water skiing, sailing, canoeing, kayaking, wind surfing, SCUBA, and more, add dimensions to waterfront management that make supervision challenging. Specific and consistent training is required to keep your staff on top of their game and campers and participants safe in the water.

As you begin to plan and prepare for the upcoming summer, consider the building blocks of aquatic staff training — precamp, physical training, teamwork, skills practice, and finding time.

Precamp

Whether you are new to camp or a seasoned waterfront veteran, precamp is an essential part of aquatic staff training. The waterfront or aquatics director should begin preparations before staff arrive onsite. What are all the intricacies the waterfront presents? Are you dealing with a pool, lake, tidal, or river environment? How many programs are located within the parameters of camp; how many outside of camp? It is important that you not only identify all the parts of your waterfront program but also share that information with your staff — including those sites that might not serve as vital a role but are important for your staff's overall understanding of challenges and dangers.

A Near Miss

Two counselors were walking back to camp from a cookout with their cabin through a bog area with open spans of water. Making a game out of it, the counselors decided to have the campers jump from one patch of bog to the other. This was a long-standing camp tradition among cabins, and the campers and counselors were having a blast. As one camper began to cross, she stepped toward the opposite side, missed the bog, and fell into the water — completely disappearing out of sight. Fortunately, the counselors reacted quickly and performed a reach assist while the camper was still under water. Even though they couldn't see her, they were able to reach her, and pull her to the surface.

Lesson

Areas such as these pose a risk even though entering the water was not part of the activity. Your entire camp staff should be informed of potential hazards such as this.

Skills Verification

How do you know the staff who arrive at camp are qualified to perform the duties you are requiring of them? You can glean only a certain amount of information in an interview, and having a certification isn't enough to assure that the staff are prepared or qualified for the responsibility of an aquatic environment. Skills verification is a must for every staff member who is working on the waterfront. Even those who are veteran staff (including the waterfront director) should go through a skills verification before training even begins. Not only does this allow the camp to see the skills the staff have, it provides a gauge for the staff as to their capabilities, strength, and stamina in the water.

ACA Standard PA 15 part B (a mandatory standard) — To guard each swimming activity, does the camp provide, or is each user group advised in writing to provide a staff member who has "written

documentation that he or she has demonstrated skill in rescue and emergency procedures specific to the aquatic and activity areas guarded?”

Each staff member working on the waterfront needs to demonstrate skill in rescue and emergency procedures specific to the aquatic and activity areas they guard or are responsible for. This is one of the most often missed standards because while a lot of camps perform the verification, many either verify skills in a pool environment for lakefront guards and/or forget to document it. To meet the standard, the lifeguards need to perform their skills in similar aquatic environments. If they will be guarding on a lake, they need to perform their skills check on a lake — if they are guarding a riverfront environment with a current, they need to be testing their skills in that environment.

Skills verification for lifeguards should include:

- basic swimming skills
- rescue techniques
- spinal management techniques
- physical endurance

The same holds true for other waterfront staff in addition to lifeguards.

ACA Standard PA 20B — “Documented skills and training in water rescue and emergency procedures specific to the location and activities?”

Your aquatics staff — whether canoeing, water skiing, sailing, kayaking, windsurfing instructors, or other instructors — need to perform these rescues and emergency procedures in an aquatic environment similar to where they will be working. It doesn’t have to be the exact location, but a canoe instructor who is working trips on a river needs to perform his or her skills during precamp in a river environment rather than the lake in front of camp.

To assist you with skills verification of lifeguards and other aquatic staff, the American Camp Association (ACA) has [developed a set of skills sheets](#).

Knowledge of the Camp Aquatic Environment

Since most lifeguards are trained in pool environments, it is essential to train all of your staff in all the nuances you have with your waterfront program. It’s easy to scan the water when you are in a contained pool environment, and the clarity of the water is 100 percent. Move to a lake, river, pond, or tidal environment, and the conditions are completely different and foreign to most staff. Add the glare of the sun, the wind, wave action, chop on the water, depth of the water, clarity, weeds, etc., and it’s a whole new ballgame. Skills learned in the pool environment are transferable, but staff need to make adjustments in their scanning and supervision of participants in, on, and under the water because of these external factors.

Ask yourself the following questions and then do the same with your entire staff: What type of waterfront do you have? How many different types of aquatic activities do you have and where do they take place? What challenges are there to supervision and emergency procedures at your waterfront that are different from your training and unique to your location?

Review Your Aquatics Policies and Emergency Procedures

ACA standards stipulate that you need to have written safety regulations and emergency procedures.

ACA Standard PA 5 — Are safety regulations established in writing by the camp for all aquatic activities, and are they communicated to participants prior to participation?

ACA Standard PA 6 — Are emergency procedures established in writing by the camp for all aquatic activities, and are they rehearsed and communicated?

Safety regulations should be specific to the aquatic area and activity and may include those regulations established to meet other standards such as minimum ratios (PA-4); safety systems (PA-9); lookout responsibilities (PA 3); evaluation and classification of participants (PA 10); and use of (Personal Floatation Devices) PFD's (PA 23).

Each staff member should be given a copy of the waterfront emergency procedures, and aquatics staff should know the procedures and be capable of performing the rescue skills in the areas they are hired. Emergency procedures should be written for each aquatic area as they will have slight differences depending on the activity. Procedures for rescuing campers from a swamped canoe will differ from rescuing CITs in a turtled sailboat. Staff should not only practice these skills in precamp, but also as weekly training to keep them physically conditioned as well as prepared to react immediately in an emergency.

Provide Staff Appropriate Equipment

It's easy to remember to provide the big pieces of equipment on the waterfront such as spinal boards, rescue boats, rescue tubes, lifejackets, etc. Don't forget the smaller stuff. Each lifeguard or staff member who has training in first aid and CPR should be provided with his or her own personal pack, which includes gloves and a CPR mask. Most lifeguards are provided a resuscitation mask when they take their training in CPR and Rescue Breathing, so they should come to camp with it. However, the camp should provide a pack for the mask and disposable gloves (have both latex and non-latex available) so aquatics staff (and other health-care staff) can refresh their packs. Additionally, the camp should have available a few additional resuscitation masks. Aquatics staff should wear their packs at all times when on duty so their equipment is immediately available. Leaving it on the beach when they're guarding on the raft is of no use to them if they have to perform a rescue.

What's a Lookout and How Can I Use Them?

A lookout is defined as a staff person who is not a certified lifeguard and who can serve as an extra set of eyes on the waterfront to assist lifeguards in scanning the aquatics area.

ACA Standard PA 3 — Does the camp implement policies that require that:

1. lookouts be oriented to their responsibilities; and
2. lookouts be required to demonstrate elementary forms of non-swimming rescues.

Lookouts need to understand all aquatics policies, as well as their role on the waterfront. Lookouts should not be trained to perform in water rescues and should understand that they are never to enter the water in any circumstance to perform a rescue. Their responsibility should be clearly defined as to assist the lifeguards in scanning the water, to alert lifeguards of any water emergency they observe, and

to assist in nonswimming rescues such as reaches or throws with a ring buoy. Lookouts should be trained in their duties by the aquatics director or supervisor.

Buddy Systems and Buddy Checks

The buddy system is one safety system to verify how many participants are in the water. The system in place should include a variety of methods to keep track of participants in the water. This can include a buddy board, a list on a clipboard of all swimmers in the water, and buddy checks. Campers and staff should be paired off with someone with an equal swimming ability or skill level, and they should be with this person the entire period in an area designated to their swimming ability.

How often should I do a buddy check? There is no rule on how often a camp should perform a buddy check; however, a systematic procedure should be in place, and the count in the water should match the numbers of participants on the buddy board or the clipboard. Some camps perform checks every ten to fifteen minutes while others perform checks every twenty minutes. It can be only a matter of seconds for someone who is actively drowning to slip beneath the surface.

Just because a buddy system is in place does not replace the responsibilities of the lifeguards or other aquatics staff. It's easy for kids to forget they have to stay with someone when they're having fun and playing in or on the water. Diligence by your aquatics staff is a must, and they need to understand that all of these systems are in place to help keep campers and staff safe in and on the water.

Physical Training and Teamwork

Provide opportunities for your waterfront staff to stay conditioned so they can have the physical stamina and strength to perform a rescue should it be necessary. How often do you tell your staff to get in the water and do laps, or grab a bike and hit the trail? Or if you tell them to do so, do you follow up to be sure they are staying conditioned?

Provide opportunities for your staff to keep conditioned, and encourage staff to work out in some format at least twenty minutes a day. Team training, water workouts, cross training, and making time are all essential elements to physical conditioning.

Team Training

We're more apt to do a workout if we have someone else with whom to do it. Pairing up your staff or allowing opportunities for team training is a good way to motivate your staff. Consider an in-camp lifeguard challenge or contact another camp or several camps in your area to set up a lifeguard challenge.

Water Workouts

No ifs, ands, or buts about it, aquatics staff need to be working out in the water! Just as competitive swimmers continually swim to better their times, lifeguards need to be swimming to maintain and increase their stamina in the water. Provide your staff with workouts that can be accomplished in twenty to thirty minutes. Straight swimming is ok, as long as they are increasing their heart rate, but be creative and provide ideas for different things to do in the water. If you're not familiar with different types of workouts, check with a local swim coach or better yet, collaborate with your aquatics staff to assist you. Challenge your staff to swim the distance of the English Channel, the Bering Strait, or the Gulf of Mexico!

Cross Training

While water workouts are important, they don't have to be every day. Staff should have the opportunity to mix water workouts — laps in the water, a game of water polo, or other fast-paced activity — with land workouts such as running, biking, weights, or even kayaking or canoeing. While increasing heart rate is important, strength training is just as important. Multifaceted workouts can provide all around conditioning to keep your staff fit and in shape.

Skills Practice

Practicing rescue skills is essential for all aquatics staff. Carve out time (and this can be part of their workout, as well) for specific skills training. Front and rear rescues for lifeguards, underwater object recoveries, canoe over canoe, righting capsized or turtled sailboats, boat driving, etc., are all essential practice and must be done on a consistent and weekly basis. The only way to improve a skill is to continually practice it so it becomes second nature.

Mock drills or emergency dry runs — where you initiate a scenario — are good ways for staff to keep their skills sharp, enabling them to react to real and possibly dangerous situations. You can let the staff know it's going to happen, or you can surprise them with a drill. Either way, it allows them to apply their skills to real-life situations.

Collaborative Training

Many organizations have approved certifications by ACA and provide sound, quality lifeguard or other aquatic training. ACA accepts eight different certifications that meet the requirements of the standards for lifeguards alone. The challenge, however, is particularly with spinal management as each one of these courses has slight differences to how you manage a spinal injury.

Your camp staff may hold different certifications (e.g., ARC, Ellis, YMCA, RLSS, etc.). So who's in charge and how do you work together? While some may recommend you have all of your staff receive their certification from one organization, that's just not practical in camp situations. Communication in these circumstances is the key to safely and efficiently extracting a victim from the water. Lifeguards learn during their training about spinal injuries that the person who is at the head of the victim, maintaining inline spinal stabilization, is the one who gives direction to the team. Lifeguard staff should never perform a rescue or procedure that is out of the scope of their training. It is the aquatics supervisors' responsibility to make sure each staff member understands the differences in training, so they can efficiently and effectively work together.

Finding Balance

Time is of the essence in camp, especially with aquatic training. It's a challenge to find the time required to keep your staff fit and responsive, while balancing it with the demands of a full camp schedule. Many staff perform multiple roles in camp, so while they may be a lifeguard, they may also have other instructional or cabin responsibilities. Be sure to work with your camp director in carving out enough time for your staff to stay in shape and fit for responding to aquatic emergencies. Some camps pull all aquatics staff during a rest hour once a week while other day camps may have their staff practice after all the kids have gone home at the end of the day. Consider organizing your staff workouts and skills practice in shifts.

The waterfront is one of the highest risk areas in camp. Appropriately certified staff, skills verification, and continuous training are key elements to a safe summer in, on, and under the water for both campers and staff.

Reference

American Camping Association. (1998). Accreditation Standards for Camp Programs and Services.

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