

DECISION MAKING- BUDDY CHECKS FOR CAMPER SWIMMING ACTIVITIES

Camps and other programs frequently use a buddy check (bather accountability) system as a safety system to quickly account for all swimmers in the pool.

Making Decisions about What Kind of Buddy Check Systems to Use

Buddy checks are not a one-size-fits-all process. Just as not all camps are the same, not all aquatics programs are the same. Decisions making around the type(s) of buddy check system(s), frequency of buddy checks conducted, etc. must be made based on the needs of the *specific* program, taking into consideration all of the variables required to manage risk for *each* specific activity, site, and clientele served.

Prior to making decisions regarding buddy checks for swimming activities, Directors should conduct an assessment of each swimming activity and area to determine needs, and define possible areas of risk. By assessing the potential risks of the aquatics activity; looking at possible worse case scenarios, Directors can identify what they may need to respond to; responding to worse case scenarios.

All swimming activities carry the risk of drowning, by virtue of the activity. Directors also need to take into consideration other risks which may be inherent to the nature of the activity when making decisions around how an activity is going to be conducted and supervised.

Risks will vary at each activity and location, based on a host of variables. For example, the location of lifeguards in proximity to swimmers should be a factor in decision making. Buddy checks should be conducted more frequently when lifeguards are not able to easily and clearly see, hear, and speak to all of the swimmers in their area of supervision, or when it takes a lifeguard longer than 30 seconds to scan their area of responsibility.

The physical location of the activity, and surrounding environment, has tremendous impact in determining what kind of buddy check system(s) should be implemented and how often buddy checks should be conducted.

Water clarity impacts the ability for lifeguards to see the participants, which can impact their ability to control participant behaviors and/or to respond to emergencies. Campers who become submerged in cloudy or murky water are harder for lifeguards to see, often making it rescue more difficult. In these cases, buddy checks may need to be conducted frequently,

Water and air temperature may also be factors in how and how often buddy checks are conducted. Water takes heat away from the human body at a rate that is 25 times faster than air. Air temperature can also impact a swimmer's body temperature. Swimmers impacted by a drop in body temperature may become mentally and/or physically impaired, and colder water temperatures increase the drowning risks to swimmers,

Water and facility conditions and will also impact buddy checks. Tides, surface currents, aquatic plant hazards, underwater currents, hazards occurring on rivers - or anything else that might make swimming or rescue difficult - must be taken into consideration when looking at the risk of the activity. Open water settings may have sudden drop-offs, rocky or "sucking-muck" bottoms that may create entrapment hazards, water depths can be unclear, or be deep enough to create difficulty with rescue, etc. - all of which may impact how, and how often, buddy checks should be conducted.

Weather can impact both indoor & outdoor aquatic environments. Rain, wind, and sun can impact visibility. Wind may impact the lifeguard's ability to hear shouts for assistance. Buddy checks may also need to be conducted more frequently when visibility is disturbed for any reason, including from sun-glare.

Risks may also include the swimmers relationship to a piece of equipment or object. For example, entrapment is a risk inherent to swimming activities when there are inflatable toys, inflatable slides or other objects such as blobs, in use. Or the use of power watercraft in close proximity to swimmers brings its own sets of hazards inherent to those activities.

Aquatics areas with multiple uses can create some additional challenges for supervision & maintaining safety. For example, motorboats and personal watercraft can create wakes, creating hazards to swimmers and impact visibility, etc. Programs with multiple activities occurring at the same time in the same location can also be distracting to lifeguards. All of which will impact the type(s) and frequency of buddy checks.

Man-made hazards can occur in both natural and man-made bodies of water, and may impact how buddy checks are conducted. Underwater pipes, intake valves, discarded construction debris, diving boards, slides, toys, and other pool equipment, etc. can create problems with visibility, rescue, or create dangerous situations. Some camps may also have problems created by the design or construction of the facility itself - such as slippery or uneven surfaces, obstructions, poor lighting, "blind spots", location of lifeguard stands, etc which may create the need to conduct frequent buddy checks.

Also note that the frequency of need for buddy checks may vary between aquatic facilities operated on the same site, such as a camp which has swimming in both a sparkling clear pool and a murky deep lake. Procedures should be established specific to each activity at each location.

The camper-participants served also impact the decision making around buddy checks. Participant age and maturity may impact such things as ability to follow instructions, attention span, cooperation, physical swimming ability, risk-taking behaviors, or being able to recognize that they are having personal difficulty in the water. For example, younger campers, novice swimmers, or high-risk-taking youth who have challenges with following safe practices may need to participate in more frequent buddy checks.

Camps may also need to conduct more frequent buddy checks when working with non-swimmers, novice swimmers, or participants with physical challenges, mental disabilities, or medical concerns. The number of participants in a swimming activity/location will also impact the type and frequency of the need for buddy checks.

How Often Should Buddy Checks Be Conducted?

Again, decision making needs to be based on the specific needs of the activities, facilities, and clientele served. At one activity, it may be appropriate to conduct buddy checks every 10 minutes, while at another it might be every 20 minutes. Some facilities may be required to follow state codes or local health department mandates. Other programs have minimum frequency requirements established by a parent organization.

In all cases, buddy checks should be recognized as only one part of an overall safety management system. Buddy checks should never take the place of responsible supervision, and lifeguards should not become reliant on buddy checks. No matter how often buddy checks are conducted, it's not enough to prevent a swimmer from drowning!

Swimmer Orientation

Swimmers should be oriented to the buddy check procedures prior to their first time in the water. In some programs, it may be beneficial to have the swimmers practice a buddy check on land prior to swimming

Swimmer Responsibility

Many programs utilize the buddy system as a tool for teaching individual and team responsibility. Buddies are expected to stay together, monitor each other, and alert the lifeguards if either needs assistance or is missing. A buddy check reminds participants of their obligation to monitor their buddy and act as their “personal protector”.

Conducting a Buddy Check Basics

- The signal/call for “buddy check” is made.
- All campers are to stop swimming, find a/their buddy, and follow the procedures for where to go/what to do (for example, while standing still and quiet together, join hands and raise their arms.)
- Lifeguards check all areas (including a scan of the pool bottom if applicable), count the pairs, and compare the total with the number known to be in the water.

Establish a Signal

Operators will need to determine ahead how the buddy check is going to be “called”. This may be an auditory signal- such as a whistle, bell, air horn, loud call of “Buddies”, etc. or a visual signal –such as a waving flag, arm motion, etc., or a combination of these. If using a whistle, be sure the number of whistle blasts is different and easily discernable from what lifeguards use for such things as behavior correction and emergencies. Some programs also establish additional signals to let swimmers know they can resume swimming when the buddy check is completed, and for when the swim period is over.

Once They Have A Buddy, What Do They Do?

Operators will need to establish what the buddies are to do once they are “buddied up”. How this is determined will vary by the facilities, activities, and clientele served. For example, some programs have campers stand still on the bottom and hold their hands together high in the air. In others, buddy pairs sit on the edge of the pool or dock together. In others, campers have to shout out their pre-assigned buddy number, etc.

Look For the Lone Camper

A critical part of a buddy check is for staff to look for the lone camper – the buddies who are not swimming together, as this is an indicator that there may be a problem.

Conduct Head Counts Prior To Swimming

In order for the buddy check process to be effective, camp staff need to be clearly aware of how many campers are at the activity location prior to campers entering the water. The number of swimmers counted during the buddy check should equal the number of campers who went in to the water; the effectiveness of a buddy check may be compromised if no one knows how many campers went in to the water in the first place..... While this may seem obvious, sometimes staff “forgets” that a camper has gone to see the nurse, or that little Billy doesn’t come to day camp on Thursdays....

What If Swimmers Are Not Accounted For?

Operators need to establish procedures for what to do if all swimmers are not accounted for during the buddy check. For example, if swimmers are not accounted for during the first buddy check, a second

check is done. If after a second check is done and swimmers are still not accounted for, the camp's missing swimmer procedures are followed.

Buddy Checks Paired With Lifeguard Rotations

Many programs find it effective to conduct buddy checks paired with lifeguard station rotations. This can be an effective risk-reduction strategy, as lifeguards change stations when there are either no swimmers in the water, or when all swimmers are stationary and accounted for (versus the risks associated with lifeguards doing a typical station change when there are swimmers actively swimming in the water). The typical procedure is that the buddy check is conducted. If swimmers are accounted for, then lifeguards rotate positions. After the lifeguards are in place and ready, campers are permitted to continue swimming.

What About When A Swimmer Needs To Leave The Water?

Procedures should be established for if a buddy needs to leave the water - to use the restroom, get a drink of water, etc. Some programs have procedures that if a buddy needs to leave the water for any reason their buddy must also leave until both are ready to return. In other cases, the swimmer has to notify a designated staff member who is keeping track of campers who are on deck; not in the water, or has to move their "tag" to an "out of the water" position on the buddy tag board.

To Pre-Assign Buddies or Not?

Some programs pre-assign campers to a buddy, typically assigning buddies of the same level swimming ability together. Other program allows campers to select their own buddies prior to swimming. Other programs simply have campers pair with whoever they are nearest to at the time of the buddy check.....

There are many variables, pros, and cons in deciding to use or not using pre-assigned buddies. For example, there is one school of thought that the only person who would know immediately if a swimmer has gone under is the buddy, and that pre-assigned buddies helps ensure a type of one-on-one "guarding". However, a system of this kind may not work with the camper population that a camp serves, or with the specific type of activities offered.

Variables, such as the number of swimmers in an area, water clarity, facility, and activities being conducted, may impact if there is a need for pre-assigned buddies or not.

Some camps limit how far a swimmer can physically be away from his or her pre-assigned buddy, which on one hand keeps buddies within close monitoring distance to each other, but on the other hand may restrict activity participation. And although pre-assigned buddies are normally in the same swimming ability group, sometimes they are not -resulting in the swimming area restricted to the buddy with the lesser ability. Pre-assigned buddies may cause problems if paired campers do not get along with each other, or don't want to stay with each other during the activity. Allowing campers to pre-select their own buddy generally ensures that campers are swimming with a friend, but on the other hand may exclude others. Etc., etc., etc.

Operators need to weigh the variable and make buddy-pairing decisions based on the needs of their specific program. (Note that in some areas, state or local codes require that buddies be pre-assigned.) It may also be important for Director to ensure that the camp's buddy check system is cohesive with the camp's philosophy and mission.

Examples:

Without Pre-Assigned Buddies

In this buddy check, swimmers simply “buddy up” with whoever they are closest to, rather than pre-assigning campers to a buddy. When the buddy check is called, campers pair up with whoever is closest to them in their swimming area. Any remaining lone camper joins a pair to make a “truddy”.

Buddy Check with Pre-Assigned Buddies

In this version, every camper is paired with another swimmer in the same swimming ability group, and are required to stay in the same swimming areas together at all times. When the buddy check is called, campers pair up with their pre assigned buddy in their designated swimming area. Any remaining lone camper would be pre-assigned ahead to a pair to make a “truddy”.

Numbered Buddy Pairs

Some programs assign each pre-assigned buddy pair with a number. For example, if there are twenty campers, they are assigned into ten pairs, and each pair is given a number, one through ten. At the time of the buddy check, the first buddy pair yells out “one!”, the second pair “two”, the third pair “three” and so on sequentially. This type of system keeps kids paying attention, and can help shorten the time it takes to complete the buddy check.

Swimmer Tracking Systems

There are many variations of systems used by camps to keep track of campers in the water. Some of these include:

- Buddy Tags/Buddy Boards
- Writing the names of buddies on a sheet and then checking them off via a “roll call” when the buddy check is called
- Color-coded bathing caps, wrist-bands, or break-away necklaces

Buddy Tags/Buddy Board Systems

Many programs use a buddy tag system, and there are literally dozens of variations for how these systems work. The general concept is that, when a camper is going to go swimming, they take their assigned tag from the designated “on land” position and move it in some manner - usually by either flipping it over to the other side or placing it on the board in the appropriate location for where they are going to be swimming. When they leave the water, they move the tag back to its “on land” position.

The options for how these systems are set up are endless. In some camps, individual campers have a tag customized with their name, or have the same tag number assigned to them for the duration of their stay. In other camps, the tag is assigned to the camper at the start of each period. In some cases, the tag number applies to the buddy pair, while in others each camper has his or her own assigned number. When the camp also uses a color coded or other ID system, the camper’s number may also be written on the swim cap or wrist band.

Some camps number the individual hooks on the board, and then the tag is either on the hook or not, or flipped to a designated color on the assigned hook. Some camps use a two-color tag system, with a different color on each side of the tag. When the tag is flipped to one color, it means the camper is “out”. When flipped to the other color, it means the camper is in the water.

Some camps designate swimming areas with separate sections for each swimming ability, others simply have an “in” (or “water”) and “out” (or “land”) system – you are either in the water, or you are not. In some camps the “out” part of the buddy board is broken into cabin or living unit groupings.

At camps with large waterfronts, or with multiple activities, the buddy tag system can be quite complex. Some camps utilize two or more boards. One board is designated as the “out” board. All camper tags are located on this board at the closing and opening of the pool or waterfront for the day. When a camper enters the area, they remove their tag from the “out” board, and move it to the other board as applicable for the activity/area they are going to be using. When they exit that area, they move the tag back to the “out” board.

Camps need to determine a process that works best for their location, activities, and clientele.

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