



## 4-H Risk Management Checklist for Paddle Sports

### Risk Management

Risk management is a process of steps. These include:

1. Identify potential risks
2. Evaluate those risks
3. Determine what you can do to reduce the risks to an acceptable level
4. Continue to monitor the activity and make changes as needed

### Overview

This checklist is intended to support 4-H volunteers when groups are planning paddle sports activities, including kayaking, canoeing, and Stand-up Paddleboarding (SUP). It is crucial for 4-H volunteers to share with 4-H members and families the importance of following all safety guidelines and to identify and address potential risks ahead of time. Encourage youth to help you identify potential risks and work with you to make the environment as safe as possible for everyone engaging in the activity.

Paddling can be a fun and rewarding activity for 4-H youth when appropriately managed. Please keep the following points in mind as you plan and prepare:

- Generally, 4-H paddling experiences occur at three different levels:
  1. **Beginner**  
Example: 4-H Groups renting equipment for a day trip.
  2. **Intermediate**  
Example: Camps, including organized day camps and overnight camps.
  3. **Advanced**  
Example: A 4-H Club focused on environmental and outdoor education that uses their own equipment and guides their own trips.
- We do not allow staff or volunteers to take youth on whitewater or coastal kayaking in the Great Lakes. (These are activities that can be done through a 3<sup>rd</sup> party organization that provides the instruction and requires that parents/guardians of the youth sign a liability waiver).
- Volunteers should work closely with their Program Coordinator to discuss all the considerations on this tip sheet when planning a paddling activity, who in turn should consult with the Outdoor Education and Risk Management Educators if there are any questions.

**To contact an expert in your area, visit [extension.msu.edu/experts](https://extension.msu.edu/experts) or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464)**

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### Considerations For Each Level:

The checklist below includes considerations for any paddling activity. However, who is responsible for each of these items and how they are addressed will vary depending on the specifics of your activity and the level it meets (Beginner, Intermediate, or Advanced).

#### Beginner:

At the beginner level described above, some of the items on the checklist will likely be taken care of by the company you are renting from. For example:

- They may be providing the equipment, and you would not need to worry about locating and inspecting it prior to the trip.
- They may also provide an orientation for you and your participants prior to launching the vessels.

In any case, the important thing is to ensure that all the items on the checklist are addressed, whether by you or the representative of another company or organization.

The beginner level is also where there may be an additional liability waiver for parents/guardians of youth to sign with the company or organization your group is renting from. This is addressed in the [General Risk Management Checklist](#).

#### Intermediate:

At the intermediate level, how these checklist items are addressed will depend on the specifics of your camp:

- **Any overnight or day camp that runs for 5 or more days within a 14-day period is subject to [LARA Camp Licensing Rules](#), which supersede this checklist and include requirements for paddle sports.**
- For shorter organized day or overnight camps, 4-H Program Coordinators or other MSUE staff may be more involved in planning and addressing these checklist items and will pass the information on to volunteers.

#### Advanced:

At the advanced level it is more likely that you as the volunteer will be responsible for addressing the items on the checklist and communicating your plans to your 4-H Program Coordinator.



## Checklist

### Prior to the trip:

- ☐ Review and complete this [General Risk Management Checklist](#).
- ☐ Consider the following and use this information to select an appropriate waterway and experience:
  - The skill level of both 4-H members and adult volunteers, including:
    - Paddling and swimming skill
    - Overall fitness/health
    - CPR/1<sup>st</sup> aid knowledge (having at least one CPR/1<sup>st</sup> aid certified adult volunteer is **recommended** in all situations. First aid and anaphylaxis/epi-pen training are **required** in some situations- see the [General Risk Management Checklist](#).)
  - The type of vessel you plan to use (canoe, sit-upon kayak, sit-in kayak, SUP, etc.)
- ☐ Plan for communicating a cancellation to all participants and families.
  - A change in weather or water conditions may necessitate cancelling and/or rescheduling your activity. Weather and water conditions should always be evaluated at the time of the activity and a decision made whether conditions are safe for paddlers.
- ☐ Locate, prepare, and inspect the following necessary equipment:
  - Appropriate PFD for every participant (guidelines can be found [here](#)).
  - Water shoes or sandals for each participant (must be worn while paddling).
  - Whistles
  - Throw bag/floating rope.
  - First aid kit in a waterproof container, including contact list for relevant authorities (area DNR officer, Sheriff, etc.) \*Additional information on first aid kit contents can be found [here](#)).
  - Water for every participant
  - Spare paddles
  - Sponges or bilge pumps
  - A map of the area you are paddling.

\*Additional equipment may be needed depending on the length of your trip and other factors.

- ☐ File a float plan with your 4-H Program Coordinator and another trusted contact on shore, including:
  - **Who:** Names of everyone on the trip and contact information for leaders.
  - **Where:** Where you are putting vessels into the water and taking them out.
  - **When:** Estimated launch and return time and when to notify authorities if you do not check in.
  - **What:** What to do if you don't return or check in as scheduled.

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**During the trip:**

- ☐ Provide an orientation on land before launching vessels:
  - Review the equipment paddlers will be using.
  - With beginning paddlers, review basic strokes.
  - Review and demonstrate how to move within the vessel and explain that this should only be done if absolutely necessary (keep points of contact with the boat, remain low, do not stand up).
  - Review any signals you may be using on the water (whistle signals or paddle signals).
  - Review the course you will be paddling.
- ☐ Utilize a staff member or volunteer as a “sweep” – have them remain at the back of the group to ensure no one falls behind.
- ☐ Utilize a staff member or volunteer at the front of the group to scan for upcoming hazards.
- ☐ Actively monitor paddlers to determine if breaks or pace adjustments are needed.
- ☐ Unless trip leaders and youth participants are comfortable with and have reviewed basic self and assisted rescue techniques, paddle close to shore and in shallow waters.

☐ **After the trip:**

- Ensure that all equipment is returned and properly stored.
- Reflect and debrief with youth. Some questions you can ask are:
  - How was the trip?
  - What was challenging?
  - What was fun?
  - How does paddling relate to the 4-H Life Skills Wheel?
- Reflect and debrief with your trip leaders:
  - What went well and what can be improved?
  - Was there anything that you weren't prepared for?



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**Support:**

**Additional Resources from the American Canoe Association (ACA):**

[www.americancanoe.org](https://www.americancanoe.org)

[American Canoe Association Tip Sheets](#)

[ACA Paddle Sports Online Course](#)

[Float Plan Template](#)

As you are working out the details of your trip, please reach out to the Outdoor Education and Risk Management Educators with any questions. We are happy to help you plan an enjoyable, safe experience for your group.

For more information contact:

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