

# Activities — Risk Assessment



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This is one of a set of factsheets introduced in February 2001.

It provides guidance for leaders on how to conduct a risk assessment both before and during an activity.

The publication of future editions will be notified in SCOUTING Magazine, Talking Points and the Activities Newsletter.

## Introduction

In the many activities we can offer, we provide challenges that seek to encourage the development of young people. These are often challenges they do not face every day and young people can experience a great sense of achievement in completing them. Some degree of risk is unavoidable if the sense of adventure and excitement is to be achieved, but it is - and should be - much less than the participant perceives. As was suggested by David Jamieson MP, it is important to remember that we seek to provide: **“EXCITEMENT but not DANGER - ADVENTURE but not HAZARD.”**

Accordingly we need to assess and control the risks associated with activities in order to minimise the chance of injury.

## What is a Risk Assessment?

It is not that difficult. A risk assessment is simply a look at what could go wrong - both before and during the activity - and then deciding on ways to prevent - or minimise - these potential problems.

## Hazards and Risks

Two terms, are frequently used during a risk assessment:

- A **hazard** is anything that could cause harm. In the context of adventurous activities, a hazard could be extreme cold, a fall from a height or hypothermia.
- A **risk** is the chance - high or low - that someone will be harmed by a hazard.

The most important part of a risk assessment, is to decide whether a hazard is **significant**. This determines what measures you can take to **minimise** the risk **to an acceptable level**.

It could be considered that hypothermia is a significant risk when taking part in mountain activities, canoeing or sailing. However the risk can be reduced, for example, by wearing appropriate windproof clothing or wet suits - depending upon the activity!

## Carrying Out a Risk Assessment

We all carry out informal risk assessments, from the time we get up each day, until we go to bed. We assess risk often without even realising it.

For example, what would you do before crossing a busy road? Instinctively we stop and look. We consider the speed and amount of the traffic and have in mind other factors such as bad weather (wet roads: increased stopping distance) or poor

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visibility (either the bad lighting - at night - or mist, or you cannot see much of the road because of bends). Based on proper early training and our experience of crossing a road before, we either decide it is safe to cross on this particular occasion, or that we need to move elsewhere. This may be to a pedestrian controlled crossing where risks such as traffic speed and poor visibility are reduced.

### **Five Steps to Risk Assessment:**

In their publication - *Adventure Activities Centres: Five Steps to Risk Assessment*, the Health and Safety Commission emphasises its systematic approach to risk assessment.

#### **Step One: Look for the hazards:**

It is necessary for you to stand back from the activity, and look afresh at what could cause harm. It is important to concentrate on the significant hazards. These are hazards which harm or affect several people. It might be a good idea to ask others what they think; they may have noted things that were not immediately obvious to you.

#### **Step Two: Decide who might be harmed and how:**

These could be young people taking part (or waiting to do so), the instructors, others supervising the activity, those in the area of the activity or casual observers. In identifying the hazards (Step One) you have already identified the potential of how these people might be harmed.

#### **Step Three: Evaluate the risk and decide whether existing precautions are adequate or whether more should be done:**

You have already identified the hazards. Now consider the likelihood of each of these hazards causing harm. This will determine whether or not you need to do more to reduce the risk. It is

possible that even after all reasonable precautions have been taken some degree of risk will remain. What you have to decide, for each significant hazard, is whether the remaining risk is high, medium, or low. For some activities you have to ask yourself if everything has been done to comply with the law - and, in our context, the requirements also of *Policy, Organisation and Rules*. Everything reasonably practicable must be done to reduce and control the risk. Your aim is to minimise risks by adding such precautions as may be necessary. Likewise, the competence of instructors/leaders and adherence to good practice play a vital role in the provision of safe activities.

There are many ways in which risks can be minimised. This might be a change in venue, additional training, an increased staff/participant ratio and properly equipped participants. Likewise, plans may have to be modified during the activity, based on an on-going risk assessment. Later in this factsheet, we will relate this to typical Scout activities.

#### **Step Four: Record your findings:**

You must inform those who will be taking part in the activity of your findings and what action should be taken. The recording of your findings might vary depending upon circumstances.

A risk assessment for the use of a permanent climbing tower on a campsite should be a document that each instructor has to read (and sign) prior to the start of each session. It should cover the points you have identified in Steps One to Three above. The risk assessment must be suitable and effective and must show that:

- A proper check was made.
- You decided who might be affected.
- You dealt with all the significant hazards, taking into account potential users.
- The precautions are reasonable, and the remaining risk is judged acceptable.

The recording of the assessment should be in a format which is easily read - don't write a book! Risk assessments are not operating procedures - they inform and determine key aspects of the operating procedures. At the campsite your risk assessment may have determined that no more than 30 people may be admitted to the swimming pool at any one time due to the size of the pool and the need to avoid overcrowding. This assessment will then be reflected in the pool's operating procedure and a requirement placed on the lifeguard and those controlling bookings for the pool to count.

A risk assessment for a day in the hills or on water that you have not visited before cannot be formalised in exactly the same way. In these cases, refer to the examples later in the factsheet.

#### **Step Five: Review your assessment and revise it if necessary:**

In all cases, it is good practice to review your risk assessments from time to time, to ensure that the precautions are still working effectively. If there are any significant changes, review and revise the assessments to take account of the new hazard. For those risk assessments for a campsite, and activities on site, it is important to ensure that when carrying out a risk assessment the date is also set for the next review. Make sure that all relevant documentation is changed.

#### **Risk Assessment - In Practice**

So far we have looked at theory, with a few examples to illustrate the key points.

There has sometimes been a tendency to use 'standard' risk assessments for outdoor activities. We must remember however that as the environments we explore are constantly changing, such assessments cannot be set in stone. Also, although you may have visited the area before, the chosen route on land or water may be a new one. Or the weather conditions may be dramatically different. So how do we start?

#### **Using the five steps to risk assessment:**

An example of a simple risk assessment for canoeing on a local canal - based on the five step approach - is shown in the table in Figure 1.

#### **In more detail:**

We can add some important points to this process. Risk assessment starts at the planning stage. First consider the party: their abilities, equipment and training. Then consider the area to be visited and then, of course, the skills and abilities of the leader. The important hazards might be those of travelling on a motorway or of activities at the campsite. One example of a hazard sometimes forgotten: after a weekend of activities is it appropriate for the leader (who has been fully participant in the activities) to be the one who drives the minibus many hours to take the party home? Asking a parent or member of the Scout Fellowship to support the activity by driving the minibus can significantly reduce the risk. This could also give some greater flexibility in route planning; walking or canoeing routes need not necessarily start and finish at the same point.

While preparing for an activity, there are a number of aspects that the leader will have to consider. We have provided a checklist in diagrammatic form (Figure 2), which incorporates these various aspects and is linked to the steps of risk assessment outlined earlier in this factsheet. At any point in your planning you must reconsider - and modify your plans as appropriate - if the risk of harm, stemming from an identified hazard, cannot be minimised to your satisfaction.

When out and about, the party leader must be constantly assessing the terrain, state of the party, the weather and many other factors. The leader must decide what the risk is at that moment and if plans must be altered in the light of this continual revision of the risk assessment. We have provided a check-list in diagrammatic form (Figure 3), which incorporates the various aspects of this continual revision. Some potential hazards are not included, such as a loose boulder or icy patch on the ground, or underwater hazards whilst canoeing. Remember, these have to be included

in your assessment and communicated to the members of the party.

The best laid plans are there to be modified and that is part of the on-going risk assessment. That is why 'escape routes' are included when making route planning for a day in the hills. Likewise, the total number of hours of planned activity is calculated. All this information should then be used during the activity. In some incident reports we have read it was obvious that the leader was intent on completing his objective and had forgotten about the welfare of the party members, or the escape routes or the number of hours of planned activity which were going to be well exceeded. Things started to go wrong.

A simple example of constantly assessing the risks might be a party of Scouts on Dartmoor with the weather conditions deteriorating (with increasing driving rain and decreasing visibility). The leader assessed the situation and decided that it was best not to continue with the expedition. Everyone was disappointed. It was a hard decision to stop and turn around but safety had to be of prime importance. It is better to explain to the young people why the party turned back than have to explain to parents why you did not.

#### **Other methods:**

The approaches described above, for conducting risk assessments, are not the only ones that exist. Use whichever one you are comfortable with. Remember, it is important that you conduct the assessment and modify your plans accordingly, to minimise the risks to an acceptable level.

#### **Conclusion**

There is a clear distinction between perceived risk (in the eyes of young people) and actual danger. We have to minimise the latter.

#### **Publications Cross Reference**

*Policy, Organisation and Rules - current edition.*

Adventure Activities Industry Advisory Committee  
- *Adventure Activities Centres: Five Steps to Risk Assessment*, HSE Books ISBN 0-7176-2463-3

**EXAMPLE OF A SIMPLE RISK ASSESSMENT – CANOEING ON THE LOCAL CANAL**

STEP 1

STEP 2

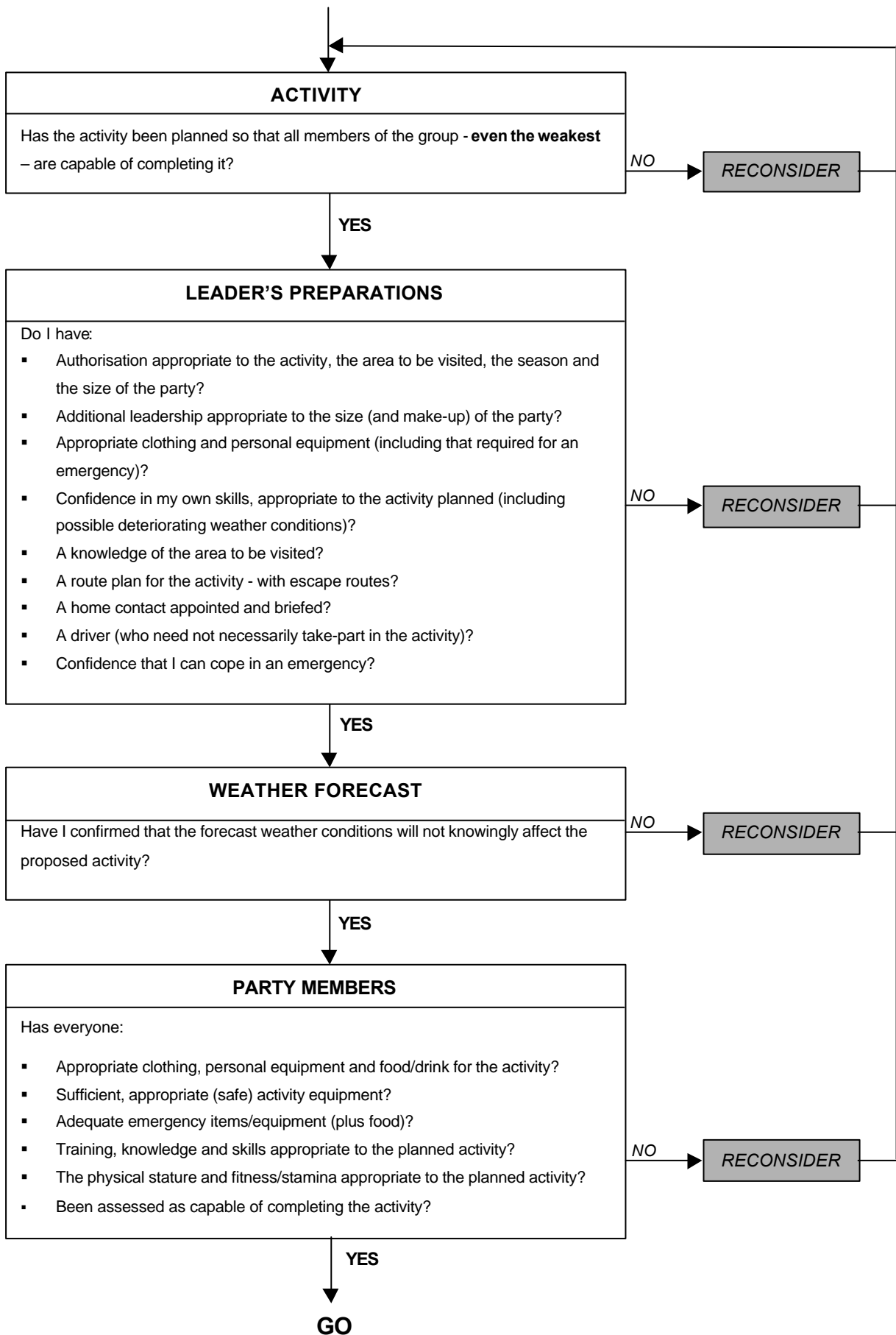
STEP 3 (AND 4)

STEP 5

HAZARD	WHO MIGHT BE HARMED?	IS THE RISK ADEQUATELY CONTROLLED, OR IS MORE NEEDED?	REVIEW AND REVISION
Water (ie. Drowning)	All involved	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Swim checks prior to activity.</li> <li>2. All participants, spectators and instructors to wear appropriately fitting buoyancy aids.</li> <li>3. Supervision by competent person.</li> <li>4. Provision of safety boat.</li> </ol>	
Slipping hazards: access to and egress from the canal.	All involved	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pre-briefing warning participants and spectators of slippery conditions.</li> <li>2. Warning sign at points of access and egress.</li> <li>3. Supervision at entry and egress points to assist entry and egress.</li> </ol>	
Striking head on canal bottom, sides or canoes	Instructors and participants	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provision of adequately fitting protective equipment.</li> <li>2. Use of water area deep enough to avoid head coming into contact with bottom of the canal if the canoe 'rolls'.</li> <li>3. Pre-exercise briefing warning of dangers of canoeing in the areas near the canal banks.</li> </ol>	

Adapted from: *Adventure Activities Centres: Five Steps to Risk Assessment*

# ADVENTUROUS ACTIVITIES – A PRE-ACTIVITY CHECK-LIST



**DURING AN ACTIVITY – TO MONITOR CONTINUOUSLY**



If the answer to any question is **NO** then it is time to consider your plans for the activity and modify accordingly.