

# Dreading Water

**If summer camp swim checks twist your Scouts' stomachs into square knots, here's how to make the checks less stressful.**

*By Jeff Csatari*

*Photograph by Tom Hussey Photography*



Not all Scouts immediately take to the water. But when they show up for summer camp, they all have to participate in the BSA's swim check. Many take it in stride. Others do not.

Michelle Matowski remembers an especially difficult experience for one Scout who had a single goal for the summer: earn an aquatics merit badge. But the Scout's plans were dashed when he didn't receive a "swimmer" tag at the swim check on the first day of camp.

"When he took off his goggles," recalls Matowski, a committee member who was attending Scout camp with Troop 1104 of Dearborn, Mich., "I could see that he was sobbing. I felt so bad for this Scout. His world just came crashing down. It was like someone took away his birthday party."

The first day of camp can be an overwhelming experience for boys for many reasons: being away from home, uncertainty about what they will experience, or thoughts of how they will measure up to their buddies. Not passing the swim check can be difficult, causing a disappointing or even embarrassing start to Scout camp week.

You don't have to let that happen. Unit leaders can help their boys both before and during camp to have a positive experience by preparing them ahead of time—in part by recognizing that swim checks can produce anxiety, especially for those who fear swimming in a lake or river where they can't see the bottom.

Still, the swim check is a vital demonstration of a boy's ability to take care of himself in the water. And it's important to remember that a member of the camp's aquatic staff will work one-on-one with any Scout and recheck the boy during the week if he wants to advance from nonswimmer to beginner to swimmer.

How can you reduce your Scouts' anxiety about the swim-check process? Follow this advice from adult leaders, child psychologists, parent volunteers, and experienced swim instructors.

**The BSA swim check**, compulsory for everyone who participates in aquatics activities, classifies the swimmer's ability, explains Bill Hurst, chairman of the Boy Scouts of America's Health and Safety Support Committee. To obtain the "swimmer" classification, a Scout or leader must jump into water over the head, swim for 75 yards in a strong manner, turn, and swim 25 yards using a resting stroke (elementary backstroke). After that, he must float and rest. "We want you to demonstrate that you know how to react in deep water," Hurst says. The test parameters are similar to those of the American Red Cross Swimming and Water Safety Program and the YMCA.

"There's real purpose to the swim check," says Dave Smith, an assistant Scoutmaster of Troop 214 in Salina, Kan., and an aquatics director at Camp Hanson. "If the canoe flips in the middle of the lake, you may not be able to swim the entire way to shore. You need to demonstrate that you can do a resting stroke and know how to float when you're exhausted."

Smith says that the key for the anxious boy is explaining the purpose of the swim check: keeping him safe in the water. "You really have to overemphasize this for some of the boys," he says.

"In their minds, it's a test of all their masculine vigor and boyness," says William S. Pollack, Ph.D., an assistant professor of clinical psychology at Harvard Medical School and director of the Center for Men and Young Men at McLean Hospital. Those who don't "measure up" may retreat into themselves and avoid the group.

## BSA CLASSIFICATION SWIM CHECK

All youth and adult participants are classified as swimmers, beginners, or nonswimmers based on swimming ability confirmed by the BSA swim checks. Each group is assigned a specific swimming area with depths consistent with those abilities. The classification tests should be renewed annually, preferably at the beginning of the season.

**SWIMMER** Jump feet first into water over the head in depth. Level off and swim 75 yards in a strong manner using one or more of the following strokes:

sidestroke, breaststroke, trudgen, or crawl; then swim 25 yards using an easy resting backstroke. The 100 yards must be completed in one swim without stops and must include at least one sharp turn. After completing the swim, rest by floating.

**BEGINNER** Jump feet first into water over the head in depth, level off, and swim 25 feet on the surface. Stop, turn sharply, resume swimming, and return to the starting place.

**NONSWIMMER** is anyone who has not passed the beginner or swimmer tests.

*Photograph by John R. Fulton Jr.*



In his book *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, Pollack calls this behavior following “the Boy Code.” This code includes unwritten rules along the path to manhood that prevent boys from expressing their feelings and make them feel ashamed of failure or even of having interests that are not considered masculine, which is almost anything outside of sports.

“Boys are brought up not to show vulnerability, to always be tough and strong,” Pollack says. They’re unlikely to let on when something is troubling them.

A case in point: Chris Thurber, a Ph.D. and faculty member at Phillips Exeter Academy, has spent 20 years on the staff of Camp Belknap, a YMCA property on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. A clinical psychologist and author of *The Summer Camp Handbook*, Thurber is an authority on dealing with homesickness in children. He has a long-held interest in exploring kids’ emotional adjustment to summer camp (see “Not a Happy Camper” in our May-June 2008 issue or at [scoutingmagazine.org](http://scoutingmagazine.org)).

Several years back, Thurber polled Belknap boys 28 hours after their arrival about their first impressions of camp. Thurber asked the kids, who were ages 8 to 16 and a mix of first-year and return campers, to write down their best and worst experiences of camp.

“Far and away the worst thing for any age kid was our dock test,” Thurber says. More than 85 percent of them said they hated it. The results stung Thurber like lake water up the nose. And for good reason: He’s Camp Belknap’s waterfront director. “Here I am a psychologist, I have 20 years of aquatics training, and I’m the program head of the camp’s most psychologically traumatic activity!”

Thurber can laugh about it now, but it was so shocking that he immediately took action. He gathered some boys together to chat about ways to make the dock test less intimidating. He learned that campers didn’t like thinking of it as a “test” and that they felt anxious about being evaluated among kids they didn’t know. They also hated “performing” in front of their parents. Because the swim test was the first scheduled activity, many parents stayed around to see how their kids did. Some boys also told Thurber that they felt uncomfortable changing clothes in a room full of their campmates.

“We created a trifecta of embarrassing judgmental factors for these kids to which we added the environmental shock of jumping into water colder than they are used to,” Thurber says.

Things had to change. But Camp Belknap *had* to have a “dock test.” So Thurber adjusted everything else. First, he changed the name to the less-intimidating “swim check.” The aquatics staff would stress that it’s not pass/fail but rather a classification exercise so that everyone can participate in water activities. Next, they streamlined camp registration to eliminate waiting in long lines for the swim check, another anxiety producer.

Perhaps the most effective change, though, was moving the swim check to the afternoon, after parents had gone home. Instead, the camp experience began with fun games such as ultimate Frisbee, tennis-racquet baseball, and table tennis tournaments. “We front-loaded the day with a lot of fun, which eliminated making kids have to change their clothes and jump into a cold lake as soon as they got to camp,” Thurber says.

The swim check still produces some anxiety, but it's a lot less without the scary name. Now, before the experience Thurber tells campers, "You may be happy or disappointed with your classification, but no matter if you are a guppy, minnow, or shark [YMCA swimmer classifications], you will have fun in the water."

A year after implementing the changes to the first-day-of-camp process, Thurber polled the campers again. This time, the swim check didn't even show up in the top 10 of campers' worst impressions. "Semantics and structure can change kids' entire experience," Thurber says.

### **TAKE STEPS BEFORE COMING TO CAMP TO REDUCE THEIR ANXIETY ABOUT GETTING INTO THE WATER:**

**DO WARM UP DRILLS.** "A Scout leader should know who his swimmers and nonswimmers are long before getting to camp," says Jeff Stern, committee member and past Scoutmaster of Troop 377 in the Suffolk County (New York) Council. Identify Scouts who might have anxiety around the water or with the swim-check process. Stage a troop swim night at a pool several months before summer camp and make the BSA swim check part of it.



*Photograph by Will Van Overbeek*

"Everyone takes the test, even leaders, so you're not singling out the new Scouts as special," Stern says. His troop often invites Webelos Scouts who'll be crossing over to Boy Scouting to the troop's swim night. "It's an opportunity for everyone to get familiar with one another, establish trust, and get a sense of who might need swimming instruction long before they get to camp."

**ASK THE PARENTS.** Early in the year, talk to the parents to identify boys who cannot swim or who have a fear of water so they're not placed in a stressful situation by accident.

"Before you can address the problem, you have to identify who is fearful," says Jeff Krieger, director of Strategies for Overcoming Aquatic Phobias (SOAP), a program that helps children and adults overcome their fear of swimming. "It's something parents may not offer without being asked."

Also, talk to the boys about their comfort level around the water, while discussing requirements for Second Class and First Class advancement.

**PREPARE FOR THE CHECK.** Familiarize your Scouts with the process. Explain the purpose of the swim check and how it will be conducted, that each boy's ability will be different, and that the better swimmers are expected to encourage and support those with lesser abilities.

**LEARN A NEW LANGUAGE.** Swimming-instruction experts say the worst thing you can do is force someone into the water who's afraid. Remember the Boy Code: Boys aren't likely to admit their fear, but you can pick up clues by reading their body language.

“Watch their muscles when you describe the test to them on the dock. Do they tense up?” says David Smith, a Scout-camp aquatics director in the Coronado Area (Kansas) Council. “You can see the lack of confidence in a boy’s eyes as he looks at the water; it’s fairly easy to spot the hesitance and stop him from jumping into water over his head.” Some signs: nail biting, fidgeting, shivering and holding themselves, wide eyes, and fear while watching others swim.

**RECRUIT A “GRAYBEARD.”** When you identify a Scout who’s having difficulty learning to swim because of fear, it’s important to go slowly with instruction and not push them too quickly so your efforts won’t backfire.

“You want to put these kids with the best instructors, the older ones who’ve taught for years, who really love kids, know how to have fun, and have a teacher mentality,” says Sue Nelson, an aquatics program specialist with USA Swimming and a longtime swim coach.

A good instructor, she says, will show boys that they can touch the bottom; it’s not over their heads. Then they advance to putting their faces into the water and blowing bubbles. “You take small steps; it’s all about trust, creating trust with the water.”

Krieger agrees that veteran coaches, who he calls “graybeards,” should handle swim instruction. “Find seasoned instructors who are parents themselves and know how to deal with the emotions and the brain chemistry involved in the kind of fear that makes a child dig his fingernails into your neck,” he says.

**SWIM IN WINTER.** Make aquatics part of your troop’s program all year, not just in the summer, suggests Health and Safety Support Committee chairman Hurst. “This way youths are keeping fit and developing swimming skills consistently throughout the year.” This also gives you the opportunity to spot anyone in your unit who seems reluctant around the water or who has lesser skills.

Build aquatics into your advancement calendar by having the entire troop work on Swimming merit badge at a local pool in a relaxed setting. (Some councils even arrange pre-camp swim checks.) You’ll find excellent resource material for unit leaders in *Aquatics Supervision: A Leader’s Guide to Youth Swimming and Boating Activities* (Supply No. 34346), recently updated by the National Aquatics Task Force.

**Although water safety** is the top priority, group fun comes in a close second. So plan for the beginners and nonswimmers. Make sure they participate in water activities with the troop and take swim instruction. Do your best to keep them engaged so they won’t dwell on their performance in any single swim check but will tackle many new challenges and gain confidence and competence from trying.

“What’s wonderful about Scouts,” clinical psychologist Pollack says, “what really impressed me when I observed troops, was the duty to honor and respect others — and the fact that every boy, regardless of ability, has a place in the club.”

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## 7 Ways to Make Swim Checks Successful

1. **Hold “wet runs” in local pools** months before the troop goes to camp to become familiar with the swim check and build self-confidence, suggests Bill Hurst, chairman of the BSA’s Health and Safety Support Committee.
2. **Test your troop in a pool.** Anxiety often stems from swim checks in lakes or rivers where boys can’t see the bottom and worry about being touched by fish, snakes, and other water creatures. Eliminate this by conducting it in a YMCA or community swimming pool before coming to camp. Note that while swim checks may take place prior to camp, the aquatics director is expected to recheck any Scout or leader whose skills appear to be inconsistent with his classification.
3. **Have boys with water anxiety take the swim check in smaller groups** of two or three, if possible, suggests clinical psychologist William Pollack, Ph.D., “to minimize the eyes watching, the fingers pointing, the possibility of embarrassment.”
4. **Arrive early at camp** to allow your Scouts to blow off some steam after the drive and become comfortable with the new environment. Some Scoutmasters have been known to make their Scouts wear swim trunks under their uniforms on the drive to camp to save time in changing for the swim test. Not only is that uncomfortable, it keeps Scouts’ minds focused on something they might be anxious about. And the stress of rushing only creates more anxiety.
5. **Walk the boys to the waterfront** or pool before the swim check to familiarize them with the environment and visualize what they’ll be doing, just as golf pros walk the course before a tournament.
6. **Give Scouts a pep talk before the swim check.** Explain the requirements and why it’s so important that they can demonstrate their ability to float and do a resting stroke. “Be upbeat and encouraging. Tell them, ‘Hey, not everyone passes, and that’s O.K. We’re here all week to work with you, and our goal is to help everyone become a better swimmer,’” says Dave Smith, an assistant Scoutmaster and camp aquatics director.
7. **Emphasize the goal of getting better**, suggests child psychologist Chris Thurber. “Self-esteem is grounded in competence, especially for males,” says Thurber. “If the words ‘fail’ and ‘nonswimmer’ become part of a boy’s inner monologue, you might be looking at adjustment problems and enthusiasm barriers. Every boy can do something in the water, and he will feel good about himself as he progresses.”