

# Adventure Activities Licensing Service

## Peer belaying : the basics

### Issues observed by AALS inspectors (4 April 2017)

Peer belaying is popular during novice climbing sessions on ropes courses, climbing walls and natural crags.

Good practice as defined by Mountain Training UK is likely to prevent unwanted accidents, incidents or near misses.

In the climbing sessions AALS inspectors have observed in recent years, we have rarely seen the peer belaying system being tested by a climber falling off unexpectedly. Standards of peer belaying are usually good and most sessions pass without incident. However, we have seen situations that could have led to the climber being dropped if they fallen off unexpectedly.

The following issues are intended to encourage providers who use peer belaying to reflect on and, where necessary, improve their practice. We have deliberately avoided identifying solutions as these are either self-evident or situation dependant.

Terminology:

**Live rope:** the section of rope between the belayer and the climber.

**Dead rope:** the section of rope below the belay device that is held by the belayer and used to lock off the belay device or to lower the climber.

**Tailer or back up belayer :** it is common practice to back up a novice belayer with a ‘tail’; an additional person holding the dead rope in order to hold the fall if the novice belayer lets go of the rope.

There are other ways of backing up the belayer such as tying knots at intervals in the dead rope once it has passed through the belay device, but these are not considered here.

If a ‘bell ringer’ system is used to pull the rope down it must be stressed that they should not attempt to hold a fall and must let go during lowering. They are therefore not part of the belaying system and their role is not referred to here.

|                                   | <b>Issue seen</b>  | <b>Possible consequences</b>  |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>1. Actions of the belayer</b>  | i. failure to take in any slack rope quickly enough between climber and belayer  | a. failure to hold the climber’s fall.  |
|                                   | ii. holding the ropes in a position that leaves a friction belay device ‘unlocked’ (typically a ‘V’ position), rather than locking it off as soon as possible. |   |
|                                   | iii. taking both hands off the dead rope   |   |
|                                   | iv. holding the live rope with both hands  | a. rope burn to the belayer’s hands.<br>b. failure to hold the climber’s fall.  |
|                                   | v. not ‘setting up’ ready to lower the climber (i.e. the climber weighting the rope in a stable, lowering stance) with the belayer ready to lower them.        | a. scared or stuck climber<br>b. climber falls until slack rope comes tight, potentially shock loading the system and the belayers who may let go of the rope to protect themselves.                              |
| <b>2. Position of the belayer</b> | i. too far from the climb, or not in line with the ‘pull’ generated if the climber falls.  | a. injury to belayer<br>b. failure to hold the climber’s fall.<br>c. if the climber falls, the belayer can be pulled forward or sideways, potentially letting go of the dead rope in order to protect themselves. |

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|  | ii. in a position which inhibits / reduces the effectiveness of the tailer to assist with locking off the belay device.  | a. failure to hold the climber's fall.   |
| <b>3. Actions of the tailer(s) or back up belayers</b> | i. failing to take in excess slack between belayer and 'tailer'  | a. failure to hold the climber's fall.   |
|  | ii. keeping the rope to the belayer too tight so that the belayer cannot belay properly.   | a. belayer unable to belay effectively<br>b. strain on the belayer<br>c. failure to hold the climber's fall.           |
|  | iii. not aligned properly to the belayer   | a. the belayer may be pulled off their feet or to the side and instinctively let go of the rope to protect themselves. |
|  | iv. not watching what both the climber and belayer are doing and therefore not ensuring that they are acting in harmony.   | a. failure to hold the climber's fall.   |
| <b>4. Actions of the climber</b>                       | i. climbing too fast for the belayer to take in any slack rope quickly enough.   | a. belayer unable to belay effectively<br>b. failure to hold the climber's fall.                                       |
|  | ii. not checking that the rope is tight and the belayer is ready to lower them. They may lean back without warning the belayer.  | a. climber falls until rope comes tight<br>b. failure to hold the climber's fall.                                      |
|  | iii. climber 'freezes' at the top of the climb, or part way up, and is too scared to let go or be lowered.   | a. instructor's attention diverted from supervision of belaying to sort out the issue.                                 |
| <b>5. Actions of the instructor</b>                    | i. failure to identify unsafe belaying through:<br>1) focusing on the climber(s) and not the belayer(s), e.g. when they are climbing, lowering or securing themselves to the rope (particularly if the method to secure climbers to the rope is difficult to check 'at a glance' e.g. tying in rather than clipping in)<br>2) supervising novices on more than one climb if the ropes aren't close enough to allow effective supervision of all simultaneously and / or to intervene quickly if necessary. | a. failure to hold the climber's fall quickly enough to prevent injury   |
|  | ii. poor judgement as to when a novice belayer and tailer are competent to belay and/or lower  |  |
|  | iii. poor judgement as to when a novice belayer is competent to belay / lower without a tail   |  |
|  | iv. not teaching or demonstrating a system of calls or checks to ensure that the climber at the top is ready to be lowered, with all slack rope taken in and stable lowering stance adopted by climber to be lowered.  | a. climber falls until slack rope comes tight<br>b. failure to hold the climber's fall                                 |
|  | v. not getting climbers to 'practice' the lowering procedures (and lowering calls) when only a short way up the climb  | a. climber 'freezes' at the top of the climb, or part way up and it too scared to let go or be lowered                 |