

Indoor Climbing Assistant

Guidance notes for course directors and staff

INTRODUCTION

- These guidance notes should be used together with the Indoor Climbing Assistant handbook.
- It is important that candidates have the appropriate level of experience to allow engagement with course content and to develop skills to the required level. Candidates must satisfy the pre-requisites for the course and these must be evidenced, ideally in DLOG. In particular candidates need to be competent belayers to fully benefit from the course, which focuses on managing others, not themselves.
- The Indoor Climbing Assistant can only operate under the direct supervision of a qualified instructor. Therefore training should be procedural in nature as Indoor Climbing Assistants do not make decisions for the group.
- Courses can be delivered in a modular way to support access and learning as appropriate e.g. two or three evening sessions. However they must ensure that the required minimum contact time is met.
- Course staff will assess candidates against the syllabus in a continuous manner during the course. This will require these topics to be introduced and demonstrated with the opportunity for candidates to practise these skills under observation.
- It is important to distinguish the assistant standard from that of an independent instructor when assessing competencies. The assistant needs only to understand and perform to a level that benefits and supports a supervising instructor.
- The aim is to train up candidates to the required standard in the available time. If they are unable to achieve this standard on the course candidates will be recorded as 'did not complete'. Course directors can then determine what further action would be required to complete the course.
- Course staff must manage risk in partnership with the candidates to ensure safety is maintained while also developing the candidates' skills and understanding.

TECHNICAL COMPETENCE

Climbing Assistants should have knowledge of climbing and be able to identify, fit and demonstrate use of basic climbing equipment required by individuals for a climbing session. When assisting a qualified instructor in fitting climbing equipment to participants and providing technical support during climbing sessions they will be able to:

1. EQUIPMENT

- 1.1 Name and understand the use of basic climbing equipment.
- 1.2 Fit basic climbing equipment.
- 1.3 Demonstrate an ability to evaluate the condition of basic climbing equipment.

Training

A key role of Indoor Climbing Assistants can be to assist the fitting of equipment for a range of climbers. This includes fitting various types of helmet and harness. The instructor would decide which type of equipment to use but an assistant should be able to fit most common types of helmet and harness (one piece, two piece, full body and chest harness) to different aged and shaped climbers. They need to be able to do this with sensitivity whilst observing good safeguarding practice. They need to understand an instructor's directions with regard to equipment and so should be conversant with key terms and usage. They should also be able to assist with the fitting of climbing shoes and have an appreciation of the benefits of wearing these.

Assistants should be introduced to the most common ways that climbing equipment can become worn or damaged. They do not need to make judgements about the viability of equipment but should recognise when to refer it to a qualified instructor for inspection.

Assessing

Candidates should be observed fitting a variety of harnesses to themselves and others. They should also be able to fit helmets correctly. Only commonly used equipment should be examined. Old and esoteric equipment should be avoided. They should be able to spot when basic climbing equipment is damaged or worn and needs referring to their instructor.

Key teaching points

- A simple practical test could be made with a range of equipment where candidates are asked to spot if it any item needs further inspection by an instructor.
- Emphasise the proper fitting of harnesses on a range of body types.

2. BELAYING

- 2.1 Tie into the rope. Attach group members to the rope with and without a karabiner.
- 2.2 Demonstrate the use of direct and indirect belay systems set by the supervising instructor.
- 2.3 Use different belay techniques/devices.
- 2.4 Bottom rope belay a climber competently, hold falls and control lowers.
- 2.5 Whilst out of the rope system, assist a belayer to take in, hold a fall and control a lower.

Training

This is a core area of the syllabus that needs a good deal of attention in training. Assistants need to demonstrate good belaying technique. They should already be functionally competent belayers on arrival at the course but may need some time and practice to refine their technique and develop autonomous reactions. Running the course in two, or even three, blocks of time may be the most effective way to achieve the consolidation of these skills. The pros and cons, and correct usage, of assisted braking devices should be introduced to candidates.

Methods of introducing and supporting a novice to belay and lower safely should be covered, noting how to avoid or manage slack that arises in the rope. Candidates should experience what it feels like when a range of climbers fall off, but there should be little slack in the rope.

Candidates should be fully competent to visually and physically assess connections correctly.

Assessing

This area of the syllabus forms a key assessment task for the course director and time should be spent observing candidates' consistency of performance. Directors should incorporate the assessment of belaying different weight climbers with different devices and systems. Candidates should be able to use common assisted braking devices as a personal skill and should be able to manage them correctly for group use when set up and directed by an instructor.

Candidates should be able to attach themselves and others to the rope competently and in a timely fashion.

Key teaching points

- When using assisted braking devices emphasise the habit of manually checking that they lock every time before belaying to prevent reverse-threading.
- Emphasise the risks of attaching to the harness with a karabiner and a pre-tied knot and the checks required to prevent common mistakes. This is particularly important with auto-belays.

3. PERSONAL SKILLS

- 3.1 Demonstrate evidence of ongoing access to climbing walls for personal use.
- 3.2 Describe the importance of centre of gravity in climbing movement.

Training

Trainers should explain the benefits of remaining familiar with the climbing wall environment so that basic skills remain well-practised (belaying, tying on and fitting harnesses).

A simple explanation of the role of the centre of gravity in good balanced climbing movement should be introduced, along with some of the signs of good and poor execution of this (e.g. over-exertion, unstable and inaccurate movement).

Assessing

Candidates do not need to be expert climbers but should be familiar with the artificial climbing environment. Their DLOG should reflect recent experience of belaying in a climbing wall. They do not

need to be assessed on their movement skills but should be able to simply describe the benefits of climbing in balance with the centre of gravity located above the climber's base of support.

Key teaching points

- Introducing some simple exercises to reduce over-reliance on hand grip often develops better balance and movement than verbal instruction.

4. BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

- 4.1 Describe their duty of care in relation to assisting.
- 4.2 Describe and use common terminology for climbing.
- 4.3 Describe the role and philosophy of Mountain Training and its schemes, the mountaineering councils, climbing clubs and the NICAS/NIBAS schemes.
- 4.4 Describe the basic concept of grading.

Training

An initial discussion about the role and remit of the assistant should highlight the issue of duty of care. Much of this falls upon the supervising instructor, providing the assistant remains within their remit and carries out their supervising instructor's instructions accurately and responsibly.

Candidates at this level may find common climbing terms and grading systems become a barrier to understanding. It is worth highlighting terminology throughout the course and encouraging them to read the candidate handbook which includes a simple glossary.

Assessing

This can be done by written paper or by question and answer. Posing open questions, multiple choice questions, completing missing terms from tables and text, and selecting do's and don'ts from a list are all suitable formats to educate as well as to assess this knowledge.

Key teaching points

- The 'Mountain Training Ethos' film is a good resource to introduce the wider context and philosophy of the scheme.
- Flash cards can be used to name holds or moves, explaining that these terms give clues as to how holds can be used.

MANAGEMENT AND DECISION MAKING

Indoor Climbing Assistants should be able to support qualified climbing instructors and coaches with the organisation, planning, management and delivery of their sessions. They should be able to:

5. Planning and structure of sessions

- 5.1 Assist an instructor in liaising with climbing walls, parents, group members and organisations.
- 5.2 Demonstrate an awareness of environmental hazards and other site users.
- 5.3 Be aware of the existence of Mountain Training's National Guidelines.

Training

Course staff should talk through the process of bringing a group to a climbing venue and the checks and procedures that an instructor has to complete with various parties. The ways in which an assistant could support the instructor should be discussed (e.g. checking consent forms, talking to parents, liaising with centre staff over domestic arrangements, attending to individuals questions and needs etc.).

Walking the candidates around a venue and discussing the hazards and their avoidance or mitigation would be very productive. A brief discussion on the most common causes of accidents will raise general awareness of the risks of climbing and managing others in this environment.

The National Guidelines only need to be raised to introduce them as a reference document for good practice for the sector.

Assessing

Candidates should be able to list the procedures that are commonly required in order to bring various groups to a climbing wall for an instructed session. They should also be able to list the most obvious hazard zones in a climbing wall where participants, other users, or the assistant themselves could be harmed without careful observation and supervision.

Key teaching points

- A brief talk by centre staff will often highlight the main risks and responsibilities faced by climbing walls, along with the reasons for their procedures and rules.

6. MANAGEMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

- 6.1 Demonstrate good ethics for arrival, activity and departure.
- 6.2 Manage a basic safe warm up session.
- 6.3 Under direction, supervise one bottom roping party, providing back up where appropriate.
- 6.4 Under direction, assist in the safe supervision of bouldering activities with groups (including spotting where appropriate).
- 6.5 Avoid common problems with a roped party.
- 6.6 Demonstrate an awareness of fall zones, trip hazards and drops.

Training

Assistants can be of enormous benefit in helping instructors to run a smooth session by managing expectations and communication with their group, the venue management and other participants. Trainers should discuss the assistant's role in relation to different group scenarios.

The principles of a progressive warm up should be covered with candidates shown a variety of methods that would suit different abilities and ages. Candidates should be encouraged to share different warm up activities that they may have experienced or observed.

The ability to back up one novice roped party who are learning to belay represents the upper limit of the remit of this role. Significant time should be spent looking at the different methods through which this can be achieved whilst emphasising the critical nature of this role. Supporting one roped party involves much more than types of belay device and their manual back up. It also involves effective support, high levels of vigilance, optimum positioning, good reactions and clear communication with the participants.

Assessing

An essential element of this course is the assessment of candidates' abilities to assist instructors managing their groups. This could be achieved through scenario based sessions where the course director/staff acts as the supervising instructor. Directors also need to observe assistants running part or the whole of a brief warm up session that is safe, appropriate to the group scenario, and appropriately structured.

Candidates also need to demonstrate their ability to manage and back up a single roped climbing party (this is very similar to climbing wall membership standards). They should be able to tail the belayer's rope in an appropriate fashion (not too tight, not too slack). They should be observed taking over the belay to lower a climber safely and appropriately. They should be able to spot common, simple problems to prevent them from occurring (e.g. belay device mis-threaded, incorrect attachment to harness, harness incorrectly done up). They should alert the supervising instructor of any such problems to seek direction or support.

Candidates should be observed assisting a group management scenario in a bouldering wall. This could be done effectively with course peers. They need to be able to support individual boulderers with advice and encouragement, providing appropriate physical support (simple low level spotting) where necessary. For example a candidate could be given the task to supervise a traverse challenge set by the instructor, or to supervise one or two novice climbers on a simple problem. They need to conduct themselves in a safe manner by positioning themselves appropriately and spotting potential hazards for the group and others. If this takes place at a busy venue (such as during an evening) it will naturally bring out these issues.

Key teaching points

- Good supervision requires good observation and candidates need to be reminded to keep their eyes on the belay system more than the climber.
- The BMC's Warm up! Poster is a useful resource.

7. DECISION MAKING

7.1 Assist a qualified instructor in making decisions for the group.

7.2 Assess and respond to the needs of participants.

Training

A discussion can be had on the role of the assistant in helping the instructor make useful decisions for the group. The assistant could have special knowledge of the whole or part of the group depending upon their relationship with them. They may be in a better position to assess group members' confidence, motivation, goals and abilities and can at least contribute to this assessment and the decisions to address these.

Assessing

A question and answer session can be held on scenario based issues. Questions can be asked on how sessions could be adapted to meet the special and general needs of group members in order to maintain an engaging and positive learning environment.

Key teaching points

- Maintaining motivation requires the right level of challenge – neither too hard nor too easy. Candidates can be shown how to adapt climbs to suit individuals' needs while using case studies.

8. KNOWLEDGE AND DEMONSTRATION OF TECHNIQUES

8.1 Assist a qualified instructor in teaching basic techniques.

Training

Candidates do not need to be expert instructors or coaches, nor lead a coaching session. However they should be able to support an instructor by giving simple demonstrations of the basic climbing skills – fitting a harness and helmet, tying on, checking karabiners and basic balanced movement.

Assessing

This can be observed by asking candidates to assist the trainer in giving these simple demonstrations- under direction.

Key teaching points

- Candidates should be able to talk to small groups and demonstrate simple procedures with clarity.

9. WORKING WITH OTHER STAFF

9.1 Describe their role and responsibilities in supporting a qualified instructor.

9.2 Communicate effectively with a qualified instructor.

Training

The understanding of their role and its limits is crucial for an assistant to understand. They must be confident that they can respond effectively to an instructor's directions but that equally they will know if too much is being asked of them. Useful discussions can be had on the limits of their responsibility and ways in which they could be asked to go beyond these. Effective communication therefore will require the assistant and instructor to check each other for understanding.

Assessing

Directors need to assure themselves that candidates fully understand their role and what is and isn't acceptable action and decision making in this context. A multiple choice paper with different scenarios may offer a quick way to assess this understanding.

Candidates' communication skills should be observed whilst running the assessment scenarios described in other sections of this guidance. Their ability to follow instructions accurately as well as to interact with the instructor in a way that is helpful to them is very important.

Key teaching points

- Assistants need to be completely clear as to which participants they are responsible for supervising at all times in a group session.
- It would be supportive to candidates to offer some coping strategies to challenge an instructor if they became uncomfortable with their instructions.

TEACHING SKILLS

When assisting a qualified instructor Indoor Climbing Assistants will frequently need to give tuition and support to novice climbers. They should be able to:

10. TEACHING AND LEARNING SKILLS

- 10.1 Assist a qualified instructor in maintaining a positive learning environment for all participants.
- 10.2 Communicate effectively and appropriately with a group and individuals.

Training

Assistants can greatly support an instructor to maintain a positive learning environment by offering individuals both challenge and support to keep them motivated and engaged. Discussions on the use of positive language, pace and appropriate goal setting will be useful. It will also be useful to discuss ways to support those who lack confidence or who struggle with the physical demands of the activity.

Assessing

Scenario based tasks and discussion may form the best way to observe these skills. If the opportunity to work with a live group exists then care should be taken not to compromise the assessment or the groups' needs as they could conflict.

Key teaching points

- There are other goals that can be set other than reaching the top of a climb or boulder problem.
- Less talk, more action; is a good maxim when working with novice groups.
- Assistants should know how to teach belaying without a climber leaving the floor.

THE CLIMBING ENVIRONMENT

Indoor Climbing Assistants should be familiar with the indoor climbing wall environment, both small and large scale (commercial) venues. They should be able to:

11. Access

- 11.1 Demonstrate an awareness of the main rules and regulations governing the use of a climbing facility.

12. Etiquette and ethics

- 12.1 Demonstrate an awareness of the impact the group you are with may have upon other site users.

Training

Trainers should discuss the rules and ethics of the venue the course is running in, but also describe the variation in these to be found in climbing walls around the UK and Ireland. The impact and expected behaviours of various groups in such venues should be discussed, along with the responsibility to minimise the impact on other users.

Assessing

Scenario based question and answer sessions and brainstorming the most common rules and ethics found in UK and Irish climbing walls would be a simple way to assess these areas. Listing do's and don'ts is a simple way to do this.

Key teaching points

- Assistants should know the rules and common solutions to participants wearing, for example, rings, piercings, objects in pockets, long hair, bare feet, loose clothing, inappropriate footwear, religious dress, etc.
- Separating groups from other users is common practice in busy climbing centres. Managing this in bouldering walls is often more complex and should be addressed.

APPENDIX 1

Examples of continuous assessment methods

Syllabus reference	Competencies	Examples of assessment methods
1	Equipment	Observation of fitting harnesses and helmets. Example worn/ damaged equipment – Q and A
2	Belaying	Observation of personal belaying skills
3	Personal skills	DLog and questioning.
4	Background knowledge	Q & A, written tasks
5	Planning and structure of sessions	Q & A, written tasks - lists
6	Management of participants	Observation of practical skills such as backing up a belayer, supervising boulderers or running a warm up – under direction. Peer group scenarios or live groups
7	Decision making	Q and A to scenarios
8	Knowledge and demonstration of techniques	Observation of assistant demonstrations to peers or groups e.g. tying a knot, fitting a harness, belaying, moving in balance
9	Working with other staff	Multiple choice paper on role and actions/ Q & A
10	Teaching and learning	Observe communication with peers in scenario based tasks or to novice groups. Multiple choice paper on role and actions/ Q & A
11	Access	Q & A
12	Etiquette and ethics	Q & A Do's and don'ts