



Guidance to instructors on managing assistants during climbing activities

What is a climbing assistant?

An assistant is any person who supports an instructor in the delivery of their session but who does not direct or make decisions about the management of the session. The qualified instructor always remains responsible for the group and the assistant. An assistant should provide additional safety and quality to a climbing session – otherwise they are just another participant. They should be an asset to the instructor, not a liability.

It is important to distinguish between two types of assistant:

1. Qualified assistants with clearly defined competencies. The Mountain Training Indoor Climbing Assistant is a nationally accredited qualification. There are many other locally accredited assistants, such as centre assistants, who are trained and assessed under the auspices of a Technical Advisor.
2. Unqualified assistants. A 'co-opted' assistant who should be a responsible adult or appropriately supervised minor and who may typically accompany a party. If these have been given a temporary role by an instructor they are really acting as helpful participants.

In both cases the instructor assumes full responsibility for their deployment and actions.

What are the benefits of using an assistant?

There are three main reasons why working with an assistant could be a good thing:

- 1) You can run a more efficient and effective session.
- 2) You can inspire and mentor the next generation of instructors.
- 3) Assistants can improve your practice as an instructor by helping you reflect on your performance.

Assistants and other unqualified staff (such as accompanying teachers) can be of enormous benefit to your session provided that they are managed appropriately. They can support the talented, those with specific needs, their peers, or their own students and children, and can be powerful role models for the participants. They often form a strong relationship with the participants which can continue after the activity has ended.

The instructor-assistant relationship

Assistants have been a feature of climbing instruction for many years. They can work informally with a qualified instructor, or undertake formal assessment to be approved for specific roles. The Mountain Training Indoor Climbing Assistant is assessed to work with clearly defined competencies within climbing walls, such as fitting personal climbing equipment and backing up a single belayer. However the judgements as to what group activities are to be undertaken and how they are to be

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managed, remain with you, the instructor. You should take care when managing an assistant and delegating tasks to them not to overburden yourself, or the assistant.

Assistants come with a wide range of experience and competencies and you need to be aware of these in each case and manage them appropriately. They could be Mountain Training candidates, keen young climbers, experienced teachers or sports coaches or experienced participants. They could be qualified for the role or be a willing volunteer with little experience. If in doubt you should not use an assistant or be compelled to work with them. By definition an assistant cannot work independently and you hold the overall responsibility for the whole group and the assistant at all times. All assistant deployment should be risk assessed before each session begins with appropriate management put in place.

It is essential that assistants are appropriately supervised by the qualified instructor, so that there can be constant communication and guidance given. In practice this means that they should be working within sight and sound of the instructor for all off-ground activities. You should be able to intervene quickly if necessary. If an assistant has been assessed and endorsed to perform specific defined on-ground competencies (e.g. kitting up a group) then these can be delegated to them. Nevertheless it would be expected for you to check and monitor their actions. The minimum age for assistants, as recommended by UK Coaching, is 16. See:

<https://www.ukcoaching.org/resources/downloadables/coaches-minimum-standards-for-active-coaches>

Assistants who are under 18 or who are vulnerable should be supervised more closely.

Operational ratios when working with assistants

As with all instruction it is not possible to give specific guidance on maximum instructor/student ratios when deploying assistants as this will always depend upon the situation and the subsequent risk assessment. For example; a single disabled climber may benefit from the close support of two caring assistants (helpful participants) working with an instructor on the ground. However it would normally be appropriate for an instructor to manage only one climbing assistant with groups. A competent assistant should contribute positively to the management of a group and should not reduce the maximum number of participants that can be managed. In some cases it may be essential to have an assistant present (e.g. to receive participants at the bottom of an abseil) and in others it may allow for a slightly larger group to participate.

These decisions on maximum operational ratios would normally be taken by a Technical Advisor or another competent person. They will take into account all the relevant factors such as the competence, experience and qualification of the assistant, the nature of the activity, the nature of the group and the competence, experience and qualifications of the supervising instructor.

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Key practice points

- Always have a discussion with an assistant about their role and remit for each session, confirming their understanding and consent. Set clear boundaries about what they can and cannot do.
- Maintain a position of effectiveness for off-ground activities, keeping your assistant within sight and easy communication at all times.
- Just as with new instructors, new assistants should be closely monitored on their first sessions with you before trusting them to carry out their role fully.
- Get into the habit of reviewing your session with an assistant to give feedback and receive it from them.

Instructor responsibility

Remember that you, the instructor, are responsible (and potentially liable) for the actions of an assistant with your group. If they make a mistake, it could be because you had put them in that situation without proper training or controls. Therefore you need to supervise them appropriately and manage their responsibilities in a carefully progressive way, checking for understanding and competency all the while. An assistant is not someone you send to the other side of the crag or climbing centre. They work with you and in communication with you. You need to be able to intervene quickly if necessary.

Some instructors may not be comfortable with the responsibility of managing an assistant. If you feel this to be the case then you should not feel compelled to do so. However, as long as assistants are directed to perform competencies that have been sufficiently assessed and endorsed, you should be fulfilling your own responsibilities as an instructor. If this assessment is performed by you 'on the spot' then you will carry the full responsibility for that decision. It is important here to distinguish between technical competence (such as backing up a novice belayer) and non-technical competence (such as general supervision). The former would require more evidence than the latter for it to be reasonable to judge this competence. Mountain Training's climbing instructor schemes such as the Rock Climbing Instructor and Climbing Wall Instructor now include training and assessment in the management of assistants.

Assessing and briefing assistants

The ability to assess and manage another person as an assistant takes experience and carries a high level of responsibility. Preparation is important. Although the assistant is there to follow your directions, you should have an open discussion with them about their role and your expectations. You should check that they are clear about, and are content with, their role. They should also be inducted into any relevant procedures such as operating equipment, responding to emergencies and safeguarding. What should they do if something were to happen to you?

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Here is a simple checklist of things you should consider when planning how to use an assistant:

- Do they have previous experience/prior knowledge? What existing competencies do they have? Can they apply them confidently and can you use them? Are they qualified in any way?
- Do you know them well? Their aims and objectives need to match yours. Avoid conflicts of interest and agendas which could confuse or undermine (e.g. parental bias).
- Can you trust them? Will they listen to you and trust you? How is their relationship with you and with the group? You also need to listen to them and respect them.
- Are they aware and engaged with the activity? Are they switched on?
- Do you need to see them at all times? For off-ground activities the answer should be yes.
- Will they have a positive or negative effect on the group? This is the acid test.

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