

Indoor Climbing Assistant

Guidance notes for trainers and assessors

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Introduction

These guidance notes should be used together with the Indoor Climbing Assistant candidate handbook.

Candidate experience

- It is important candidates have the appropriate level of experience to allow engagement with course content. Candidates must satisfy the prerequisites for training and assessment courses. This must be evidenced in writing, we strongly prefer candidates record this information within [DLOG](#). In particular, candidates need to be competent belayers to fully benefit from the course, which focuses on assisting others.
- A thorough review of a candidate's logbook in advance of the course should provide the course director with information about their breadth, depth and currency of experience. It's important to scrutinise the quality, not just the quantity.

Responsibility for safety

- Course directors and staff should remember that they are ultimately responsible for the safety of everyone, during any training or assessment course, and will do all they can to prevent accidents leading to physical or mental injury.
- Indoor Climbing Assistant courses are for those with competence in the basic skills of climbing who wish to assist qualified climbing instructors and coaches. While course staff should endeavour to maintain a safe working environment, participants should be reminded that they also have a duty to exercise judgment regarding their own personal safety and that of other members of the group.
- Course staff should be mindful of the psychological pressure candidates may feel to perform. This can be effectively managed by course staff through attentiveness to the group's needs, recognition of individual differences, and an understanding of how group dynamics and the environment interact. Course staff self-awareness is also essential; understanding one's own strengths, limitations, and training or assessment style supports informed decision-making and contributes to safer outcomes.

General

- 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 by the end of the course, candidates will receive a 'Defer' result. Course directors can then determine what further action would be required to complete the course.

In conclusion, Indoor Climbing Assistant courses are for participants with competence in the basic skills of climbing who wish to assist qualified climbing instructors and coaches. While course staff should endeavour to maintain a safe working environment, participants also have a duty to exercise judgment regarding their own personal safety and that of other members of the group.

1. Equipment

Training:

A key role of Indoor Climbing Assistants is often to assist with the fitting of equipment for a range of climbers. The instructor will 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 familiar 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.

Top tips:

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

2. Belaying

Training:

This is a core area of the syllabus that needs a good deal of attention in training.

Attaching the rope to the harness should follow the manufacturer's guidelines, which typically are printed on the harness. Discussion should take place around the advantages and disadvantages of tying in directly versus clipping in with a karabiner and how the techniques may differ depending on the circumstances.

Competent belaying and being able to hold a fall or slip and carry out controlled lowers are all essential skills. Throughout the training course candidates should be encouraged to demonstrate model belaying technique appropriate to the device, ensuring both their safety and that of the climber, whilst providing an 'expert model' example for their future groups.

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.

Candidates should understand the difference between direct and indirect belays and how they are applicable to the climbing wall environment. Candidates should be taught to consult facility staff if unsure about the appropriate use of specific in-situ anchors.

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.

In addition to the technical aspects of belaying in a bottom rope context, instructors should emphasise key principles regarding belayer positioning, including:

- **Positioning relative to climber:** The belayer should anticipate the direction of pull and position themselves accordingly to maintain control.
- **Proximity to the wall:** Staying close to the wall minimises excess rope between the belayer and climber, improving stability, response time and control.
- **Managing weight differences:** Strategies should be taught for handling differing body weights between the belayer and climber, and understanding the associated implications for holding a fall.
- **Clear and agreed-upon communication:** Standardised and simple calls between the climber and belayer should be agreed upon to ensure clear communication.
- **Focused attention:** The belayer must maintain undivided attention on the climber at all times to ensure prompt response to any movement or potential falls.

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.

Top tips:

- Training and assessing of belaying skills requires close, effective oversight and if required, a back-up.
- Use a variety of different belay devices, ropes (varying diameters) and venues (indoor slab, overhanging etc.) to give a broad context to the skills.
- When using assisted breaking 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

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).

Exercises and games that develop good movement should be introduced, bearing in mind that this is not a coaching movement course. Course directors should be able to signpost the relevant candidates towards the FUNdamentals of Climbing courses developed by the mountaineering councils for further training in this area.

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.

Top tips:

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

4. Background knowledge

Training:

The beginning of all training courses should outline the role and philosophy of Mountain Training and its qualifications, the mountaineering councils, climbing clubs and NICAS. This may be in the form of a presentation or discussion which involves the whole group and their knowledge and experiences should feed into this.

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.

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.

Top tips:

- Mountain Training's Our Ethos film is a good resource to introduce the wider context and philosophy of the qualification.

- Flash cards can be used to name holds or moves, explaining that these terms give clues as to how holds can be used.

5. Assistant responsibilities

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.

A 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 directions accurately and responsibly. However, an awareness of safeguarding considerations and signposting to relevant training is still required.

Assessing:

Candidates should be able to list the procedures that are commonly required 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.

Questioning and tasks can be used to examine candidates' knowledge on safeguarding issues specific to supervising young people and vulnerable adults.

Top tips:

- 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. Leadership and decision-making

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.

Assistants should be aware of the support they can provide to instructors during particularly busy times such as arrival at the venue. Discuss their involvement in activities such as: managing the group on initial arrival, liaison with wall staff, initial briefings and issue of equipment. Similar discussions should be had about the assistant's role at the end of a session.

Groups will look to an assistant for guidance, direction and decision making. Candidates must be able to demonstrate their ability to direct others in a clear but supportive way. Managing groups in a climbing wall setting can be challenging at times and candidates must be able to articulate expectations and have strategies to maintain these.

Assessing:

Assessors can explore these strategies through scenario-based discussions, quizzing them on ways they would adapt these for different situations. Can they recognise when an activity should stop or be substantially changed? Are they able to balance the needs and wishes of the group with their own/organisation's, the conditions at the time, the type of activity and safety? Are they aware of when to bring matters to the attention of the instructor and request direction from them?

Where possible decision-making should be evidence based and careful questioning by assessors should ascertain the reasons for a candidate's decisions. Candidates need to be confident and consistent in their decisions without being overly swayed by the rest of the group. They should be able to articulate their decisions clearly.

Assessment of leadership and management skills is a holistic process based on multiple sources of evidence. This is best achieved as a running theme throughout the assessment course.

Top tips:

- Highlight the importance of clear communication between the assistant and the instructor regarding their responsibilities.
- Consider examining the guidance for instructors on how they should manage assistants.
- Make use of the end of course review to highlight to assistants how to review sessions with an instructor.

7. Knowledge and demonstration of 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 basic climbing skills – fitting a harness and helmet, tying on, checking karabiners and basic balanced movement.

An assistant can provide valuable input when a technique is being demonstrated or explained to a group. Demonstrations may require two presenters, for example movement skills demonstrated on a rope will require a belayer and activities can be introducing both verbally and visually. When it is well coordinated, team teaching in this way can be highly effective.

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 of supervising a traverse challenge set by the instructor, or supervising 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.

Top tips:

- Candidates should be able to talk to small groups and demonstrate simple procedures with clarity.
- Good supervision requires good observation and candidates need to be reminded to keep their eyes on the belay system more than the climber.
- Candidates should be introduced to a variety of belay devices and systems when being shown how to back up and supervise them.
- The BMC's Warm up! poster is a useful resource.

8. Hazards and emergency procedures

Training:

Discussion should be had upon arrival at each venue during the training course about its suitability and use with groups. Attention to the arrival at the venue, physical layout,

awareness of other users and objective dangers should be considered. This is best done as a practical session with group discussion to follow.

Problem avoidance is a key focus of the Indoor Climbing Assistant qualification, therefore a good amount of dedicated time is required during the course to help candidates build knowledge about preventative techniques. This will assist them in developing an awareness of potential and common issues along with simple strategies to avoid them.

The majority of common roped problems are foreseeable. Examples of common issues include:

- Climber moving off route.
- Climber refusing to be lowered.
- Climber inverting when being lowered.
- Climber topping out onto an abseil platform.

Some suggested simple strategies for instructors to avoid these common problems include:

- Comprehensive participant gear and equipment checks – make sure everything fits and is done up.
- Appropriate venue and route choice.
- Effective and clear briefings to participants.
- Challenge through choice – consider having participants climbing a short distance up a climb before being lowered down.
- Keeping the rope tight on the climber at all times.
- Maintaining constant awareness of the location and activities of other site users

Given the prevalence of auto-belays in climbing walls and the unique nature of some of the incidents that have occurred, candidates should be made familiar in identifying and mitigating common hazards such as snag hazards on the climber, helmet hangup, climber not clipping in to auto-belay, being lowered side on to the wall as well as not letting go of the auto-belay attachment karabiner until it is clipped back to its 'anchor'.

Candidates would not be expected to solve these problems themselves and the focus should remain on relating management techniques to the avoidance of specific problems.

Assessing:

Assessors should use scenario based approaches to set tasks which require the candidate to make judgements in a realistic way. Candidates should be given a range of scenarios to enable them to demonstrate their knowledge and communication skills as they seek to avoid 'common problems' occurring.

Assessors should then build upon the scenarios and consider what common occurrences may happen given the setup, location and group. These additional scenarios should be realistic for the given environment and used to prompt further discussion within the group.

Candidates should not be expected to solve problems and the focus should remain on good management techniques to assist an instructor in problem avoidance

Top tips:

- Use a scenario based approach to group management to help draw in wider issues.
- The focus needs to be on the avoidance of issues, rather than the solving of problems.

9. Working with other staff

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.



Top tips:

- 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.

10. Teaching and learning skills

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.

Top tips:

- 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.

11. The climbing environment

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.

Top tips:

- Assistants should know the rules and common solutions to participants wearing, for example, rings, piercings, objects in pockets, long hair, bare feet, religious dress, loose clothing, inappropriate footwear, 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.

12. 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	Assistant responsibilities	Q & A, written tasks - lists
6	Leadership and decision making	Scenarios and Q and A of related decision making
7	Knowledge and demonstration of skills	Observation of assistant demonstrations to peers or groups e.g. tying a knot, fitting a harness, belaying, moving in balance and practical skills such as backing up a belayer, supervising boulderers or running a warm up – under direction. Peer group scenarios or live groups
8	Hazards and emergency procedures	Observation of practical skills such as belaying, backing up a belayer and supervising boulderers and questioning on how they relate to the avoidance of problems.
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	Q & A Do's and don'ts