OEAP STATEMENT ON PEER BELAYING

The OEAP believes that peer belaying (ie students belaying each other under the supervision of an instructor) in climbing and high ropes activities is an important educational activity with the potential to realise the following benefits for participants:

- Increased levels of trust and an opportunity to examine the concept of trust (us in them, them in us, them in themselves, them in each other).
- Increased risk management skills through an opportunity for involvement in a practical risk-benefit assessment ('what do we want to do and what do we need to do to make it safe enough?')
- An opportunity to practically examine the components of challenge (i.e. chance of gain or benefit / risk of loss or harm / accurate goal setting and judgement / willingness and commitment / activity outside the comfort zone (physical and/or emotional)
- Greater sense of personal responsibility
- Enhanced emotional intelligence (including a greater awareness of their own needs and the needs of others)
- More possibilities for genuine team working
- Enhanced communication skills
- Increased involvement in the activity leading to greater learning - Students are active participants not passive consumers
- Physical skill acquisition

All of these contribute to increased levels of confidence, self esteem and personal well-being.

One to One Belaying

When the aim of a programme is to teach the skills of rock climbing then the ultimate end of this progressive process should be self sufficiency (ie one climber safeguarded by one belayer).

Clearly there will usually be a developmental process over a period of time to get to this point, requiring careful management and mature judgement on the part of the instructor. This is not something that all instructors will be competent to do.

Peer belaying in one off sessions will usually involve teams of belayers, not one participant alone (unless, in exceptional circumstances participants have demonstrated appropriate levels of competence and the instructor is competent to make an assessment of their ability).

OEAP Endorsed Statement
March 2010

Climbing and Climbing related activities

Introduction to the supervision checklist

The vast majority of climbing and climbing related activity sessions are enjoyed by groups without any mishap. However, there have been a number of accidents to both young people and to accompanying staff over the past few years. Nearly all of these accidents appear to have as their root cause simple human error. There is a growing awareness within the outdoor adventure industry that systems need to be designed to take account of the inevitability of human error.

The panel believes that climbing and climbing related activities are important and that opportunities for young people to enjoy them need to be safeguarded and developed. The panel also believes that while (ultimately) climbing is an adventure activity which carries a risk of personal injury or death, well managed and supervised sessions should be safe and enjoyable.
A major contributor to the safety of these sessions is the involvement of participants and accompanying staff in checking their own safety. This is not to suggest that accompanying adults take on any responsibility for the technical supervision of the session but rather to stress that their involvement in checking safety issues is very beneficial.

To this end the 'supervision checklist for non-specialist leaders' is offered as a tool to be used in many ways. It could, for example:

- **provide visit leaders with some questions and things to look for when considering using a new provider (perhaps on a pre visit).**
- **be used by activity providers to facilitate the involvement of accompanying staff as 'critical friends' and double checks of good practice**
- **be used by visit leaders / advisers to get feedback from accompanying staff on the safety systems of a provider**
- **give non-specialist school staff with 'in house' approval to use their own climbing wall some guidance on best practice**
- **provide accompanying staff with reassurance that the provider they are using is good. Alternatively it could allow visit leaders to make some judgements about a provider's safety management system and thereby challenge poor practice should they see it.**

Climbing and climbing related activities

A supervision checklist for non-specialist leaders (such as teachers, youth workers or other accompanying staff)

This checklist is aimed at visit leaders / assistants who may be present with a group of young people during a climbing or high ropes activity session but who are not directly responsible for the technical aspects of the activity.

The safety of these sessions depends primarily on the competence, judgement, awareness and concentration of the activity instructor but very occasionally accidents occur due to basic human error. All human beings make mistakes but the chances of a mistake leading directly to an accident can be greatly reduced by involving everyone in the safety management of the session. A system that involves double checks, that requires several things to go wrong or several people to make a mistake before an accident can happen, is safer than a system that relies on a single individual. The vigilance and concentration of all participants, including accompanying adults, provides a greater safeguard than assuming the instructor will do the correct thing every time.

As a non-specialist you do not have any responsibility for the technical supervision of the session but your involvement and awareness (together with the involvement of ALL participants) does make things safer.

Your role is NOT to question everything the instructor does. If you are using a competent instructor they will know what they are doing. The point is that competent people sometimes forget to check things or fail to see everything that is going on – this is why double checks are so useful.

The following pointers should help you to play a useful role in the safety management system by acting as a second pair of eyes and being a 'critical friend' supporting the instructor.

1. **Does the instructor brief participants on how the safety system works and where / what the critical points are?** ***Rather than simply being told 'this is safe'?***

2. **Are participants actively involved in ensuring their own safety?** ***For example do they connect themselves to the rope while the instructor checks or are they taught to check what the instructor does? Are 'buddy systems' in use?***

3. **Is the instructor actively involved in holding any belay rope?**
   If 'YES' then the instructor has not fully delegated the task of belaying to the participants but still has a controlling hand.

   If 'NO' significant responsibilities have been delegated to the participants.

   Ask yourself:

   a. **Is there sufficient time for participants to master any skill before the ability to perform it becomes critical? Is there adequate prior practice?**

b. **Are the participants sufficiently mature to accept the responsibility they have been given?**
c. **Are the participants clearly briefed about their role and responsibilities? And do they appear to understand these?**
d. **Is the instructor in a position to be able to intervene if necessary**
e. **Has the system been demonstrated before a full height climb takes place?** ***Although not essential, this is often good practice.***

4. **Leading a session involving peer belaying should be stressful – if the instructor(s) appears too relaxed this is not a good sign. To the participants they should appear to have a relaxed control but you should be able to detect the instructor 'twitch' (an awareness of what is going on all around them). Things to look for are eye and head movement and level of concentration.**

5. **Does the instructor stand in the best place to be able to see all the activity and all the participants and do they look in the right place / focus their attention on the right things?** ***When the instructor is not holding the belay rope they should focus virtually all their attention on the belayers and not the climber(s).*** **If the instructor cannot see the belayers do they put something in place to 'back up' the system should the belayers let go?**

6. **Does the instructor communicate well?**
   - **Verbally – do they use their voice well to give instructions?** ***Do they use names? Are pitch and tone appropriate? Do they give clear directions and make it clear who they are giving these directions to?***

   - **Visually - Eye contact is a vital element of good communication - can, and does, the instructor make eye contact with the participants?**

7, **Is there a simple communication system between climbers and belayers at the point of transition from climbing to being lowered?** ***This would normally involve eye contact as well as verbal communication.***