



Belays—the rope safety systems used by climbers—are essential safeguards for many COPE (Challenging Outdoor Personal Experience) and climbing activities. Belays should always be employed for heights over 6 feet, but they are only activated if someone slips, falls, or needs to be lowered. It is important to know the hazards associated with climbing and the consequences if or when a belay is not deployed correctly, either by the belayer—the ground person helping to secure the climber—or by climbers themselves.

Incident Review #1

On a camping and rock climbing trip, a belayer lost control of the rope while lowering the Scoutmaster from the top of a climb. This caused the leader to free-fall 20 feet and sustain multiple compound fractures of his lower left leg.

Key Points

- Climbing activities should not proceed until a qualified instructor specified in *Climb On Safely* is confident that all belayers are well trained and highly responsible.
- *Belay On*, the BSA's reference manual, has many resources for safety and guidance for climbing and belaying.
- A safety PAUSE can help all participants take a moment to review hazards. It should include the CHECK system specific to climbing.
- A backup belayer adds an extra margin of safety.

Incident Review #2

A 39-year-old registered adult was showing Boy Scouts rock climbing techniques when his belay line failed to catch. He consequently slipped, hit his head on the rock wall, and fractured his skull in the fall.

Key Points

- Even experienced climbers can make mistakes, so a review of safety practices is for the benefit of all participants.
- This is a good example of why helmets are important when climbing.
- A backup belayer can help with these types of incidents.

Incident Review #3

Miscommunication between a staff member on top of a climbing wall and a 13-year-old Scout belayer on the ground led to a climbing Scout falling approximately 40 feet to the ground.

Key Points

- Communication is important. Be sure to review verbal belay signals, and make sure you can hear and respond when climbing or belaying.
- If you cannot communicate clearly, alter your plans. Remember, if it is too windy or the area is too noisy for climbers and belayers to hear one another clearly, climbing and rappelling should be postponed or moved to another site.
- Keep unnecessary noise to a minimum. Noise and the distractions of casual conversations can confuse belayers and those on belay, too.





Incident Review #4

A Learning for Life participant who had climbed an element took off his harness and put it back on by himself. Consequently, the pre-climb safety check to ensure the harness was buckled properly was not conducted by the assistant who was belaying the climber. The LFL participant slipped after moving out about 6 feet from the climbing tree on the cable. He fell about 2 feet before reaching the end of the rope, at which point the harness became unfastened at all three buckles, and he fell free.

Key Points

- A pre-climb safety CHECK can help to ensure that a climber is safe through their clothing, harness/helmets, environment, connections, and knots.
- Be sure your climbing harness is the right size and is adjusted so removal isn't needed.

Incident Review #5

An 11-year-old Scout was climbing by himself and fell from the top of the climbing wall. His safety clip failed to hold to his climbing harness, leaving him to fall without any restraints. The climbing harness was also on backward. His injuries included a minor fracture to his pelvis, a bruised lung on one side, a small puncture to his lung on the other, and a mild concussion. He was admitted for overnight care. The boys all received safety training, belay instructions, and supervision. The boys were allowed to free climb and were asked to settle down and sleep before this occurred.

Key Points

- No one is allowed on any climbing structure except when supervised either by a BSA climbing or COPE director/level II instructor or someone with equivalent training from a recognized professional organization.
- In addition to instructors, qualified supervision includes two registered adults who are at least 21 years old and trained in Climb On Safely policies and procedures. One of their tasks is to prevent unauthorized climbing.
- Even though free climbing does not use ropes or other equipment for assistance, safety lines, belays, or spotters are still required for BSA activities.

Discussion Questions

- What hazards might be present at the location you're considering?
- What are the five points of a safety CHECK?
- Do you have any safety advice from a previous rappelling or COPE experience?
- What lessons have you learned from this incident review?

Resources

- *Belay On*: https://filestore.scouting.org/filestore/Outdoor%20Program/pdf/430-500_BelayOn_WB.pdf
- Sports and Activities—Climbing and Rappelling: www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss08/
- COPE and Climbing: www.scouting.org/outdoor-programs/cope/
- Climb On Safely Training: www.scouting.org/outdoor-programs/cope/climb-on-safely/
- Safety CHECK: https://filestore.scouting.org/filestore/Outdoor%20Program/pdf/CHECK_Explanation.pdf
- Safety PAUSE: <https://filestore.scouting.org/filestore/healthsafety/pdf/680-046.pdf>

