



Outdoor adventure is the promise made to youth when they join the Scouting program. Scouts yearn for outdoor activities that stir their imagination and interest. In the outdoors, they have opportunities to acquire skills that make them more self-reliant. They can explore and complete challenges they might have thought were beyond their ability—like climbing and rappelling, hiking, and COPE activities.

But with these challenges comes the risk of falling. We have all heard the expression, “It’s not the fall that hurts but the sudden stop at the end.” In scientific terms, a fall is a sudden descent in space driven by gravity. That definition, in itself, doesn’t sound so severe, but the consequences of a fall are often disabling and sometimes deadly.

## Incident Review #1

A 47-year-old climbing instructor was rigging a tower that her unit planned to use for climbing and rappelling. She climbed alone to the top of the tower to rig the rappel and then started back down the tower. About 5 to 10 feet from the top she fell, landing on her back at the base of the tower. Immediate first aid was provided but she succumbed to her injuries. An investigation showed the rappelling rope was not tied off to the tower.

### Key Points

- Double-checking the anchors—the connections part of the CHECK system—might have made a difference in this incident.
- Belaying with supervision and a backup is essential even for experienced climbers.
- Avoid being overconfident. Feeling too sure of oneself can lead to some serious mistakes.

## Incident Review #2

A Webelos Scout slipped and fell 25 feet into a ravine while hiking with older Boy Scouts who were exploring an unpaved trail. The boy hit his head on rocks and suffered severe brain trauma. He was airlifted to a local hospital but never regained consciousness.

### Key Points

- The boy’s older sibling was also a Scout. Younger Scouts may feel pressured to keep up with an older brother or sister, one of the reasons age-appropriate guidance was developed.
- Camping environments where siblings or other family members are present carry additional risks that need to be considered in your planning.
- For younger Scouts, less rugged activities are more appropriate as they begin to acquire outdoor knowledge and skills.

“ Falls accounted for 20 percent of personal injury claims during the last 10 years. Those claims were the third most expensive category.”





## Incident Review #3

A 12-year-old Scout and his buddy were hiking with their unit in a national park during winter. The pair got off the trail when part of the group turned around and began a descent. The buddy grabbed a tree to keep from falling, but the other boy suffered a fatal fall from a cliff.

### Key Points

- Snow and other inclement weather can make trail markers and hazards difficult to recognize.
- If you are not an experienced winter hiker, your first trips should be day hikes in familiar areas or trips with more experienced hikers who know the terrain and the local conditions.
- Appropriate footwear, over-the-shoe traction devices, and hiking or trekking poles can assist in maintaining balance on icy trails.
- Hike at the pace of your slowest companion so that your group stays together.

## Incident Review #4

A Boy Scout attempted to jump across a 6-foot void between two land bridges during a high-adventure trip with his unit. He was unable to keep his footing and fell about 100 feet to his death.

### Key Points

- Scenic overlooks and photo opportunities can create hazards and fall risks if you are near an edge or on unstable ground.
- All participants should keep aware of their surroundings and watch out for dangerous conditions—in this case, the potential for a fall.

## Discussion Questions

- Think back to your last adventure. Were there any fall risks that you didn't consider at the time?
- Have you ever had a near miss that could have resulted in a dangerous fall? Share that experience.
- Have you ever had a climbing or rappelling experience that used a COPE element? How were fall risks addressed?
- Are you planning a scenic photo opportunity? What hazards might be present at the location you're considering?
- What training do Scouts and leaders need to avoid fall risks?

## Resources

- Safety CHECK List, [www.scouting.org/filestore/Outdoor%20Program/pdf/CHECK\\_Explanation.pdf](http://www.scouting.org/filestore/Outdoor%20Program/pdf/CHECK_Explanation.pdf)
- COPE and Climbing, <https://www.scouting.org/outdoor-programs/cope/>
- Climb on Safely, <https://www.scouting.org/outdoor-programs/cope/climb-on-safely/>
- “Climbing and Rappelling,” “Trek Safely,” and “Activity Planning and Risk Assessment” in the *Guide to Safe Scouting*, <https://www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/>
- *Climbing* merit badge pamphlet, No. 35873
- Safety PAUSE, <http://www.scouting.org/filestore/healthsafety/pdf/680-046.pdf>



“ A process used by all COPE and climbing staff in BSA programs is the safety CHECK system. Always ensure that the following are double-checked before any climbing or rappelling activities:

- Clothing
- Harnesses/Helmets
- Environment
- Connections
- Knots”