



Supervision of ropes courses

Entertainment Sheet No 14

Introduction

This information sheet sets out what the Health and Safety Commission's Adventure Activities Industry Advisory Committee (AAIAC) considers good practice for the management of safety during activities involving 'ropes courses'. Advice on maintenance of ropes courses is covered by *Maintenance of ropes courses*,¹ which should be read with this publication.

Ropes courses are built structures of pole and steel and may include natural features, eg trees, designed to challenge participants in activities above ground level.

Who is responsible for safety?

Ultimately it is your responsibility, as an activity provider to ensure those taking part in the activity, including those leading the activity, do not come to harm. One of the key factors in ensuring safety is the provision of suitable and sufficient supervision. Such supervision, and the expertise of those supervising, should be appropriate to individual circumstances and determined by the findings of a risk assessment.

Supervision of activities

The main hazards associated with these activities are:

Impact with a solid object

- Falling to the ground;
- falling onto other participants;
- swinging into something solid;
- falling and hitting different parts of the course;
- being struck by parts of the course.

Entanglement (including strangulation)

- Entanglement in ropes, nets, cables or chains;
- body parts trapped in a moving part of the course eg zipwire.

This list is not exhaustive and there are other risks.

Control measures

Listed below are the main measures that providers can take to ensure the safety of participants.

Leader competence

You should ensure that instructors are equipped with the skills necessary to deal with any reasonably foreseeable occurrences. It is vitally important that providers identify the levels of competence group leaders need to be able to ensure safety during activities. The risk assessment should detect the individual hazards. This will require training on the ropes course and ideally should include at least some practical incident and accident scenarios and responses. Details of the training should be recorded.

Equipment requirements may vary from day to day and group to group. It will need to be clear who decides what is necessary for each session. It will need to be clear who checks the arrangements, when and where they do it, and what they need to do if they are not acceptable.

It may be necessary to restrict less experienced leaders to lower risk activities/parts of the ropes course until they have developed the skills for more hazardous activities.

Qualifications are just one way of showing competence. It is unlikely that a single qualification will be adequate so a combination of qualifications may be necessary. Practical experience gained over the years should also be considered as a way of showing competence.

All courses are different, therefore site specific training and assessment of competence should be undertaken for all group leaders and supervisors

Ensuring continued competence of group leaders is necessary. There should be a system for regularly checking and updating leaders' skills (dependant on frequency of activities, modifications to the ropes course and other developments).

Identification of group competence

You should have in place a policy for identifying the competence, experience, special needs, physical and medical condition of the participants. Once this assessment has been completed, a decision on which activities or levels of difficulty will suit the group can be made. You may need to refuse to provide the activity for the group if group leaders do not have the necessary competencies, skills or equipment to undertake the activity safely.

Medical conditions and/or disabilities

There needs to be a policy for checking any conditions that may require a participant to receive special attention. They may need greater supervision or may even need to be excluded from the activity.

Group sizes

It is advisable to limit the maximum number of participants in a group per group leader taking into account group management difficulties on particular sections of the course or with particular groups. If a group is too large, two separate groups should be formed, each with a group leader, so that mutual support is available if required. The use of assistants may help group management, but the responsibilities of assistants need to match their levels of competence.

Briefings

Participants should be told how they can help ensure their own safety. Group leaders should give a presentation on the various safety aspects of the activity, covering all the relevant information. A checklist for group leaders to follow may be useful.

Participants must be made aware of the dangers and, where possible, be prevented from accessing the ropes course without the supervision of a group leader.

It may be better for instructors to deliver relevant instructions step-by-step at each section, rather than all in one briefing.

Supervision between activities

Participants not involved in an activity may become harmed eg, those 'waiting their turn' can wander off or try other sections of the course unsupervised. Some activities (particularly those of an initiative exercise nature) may involve people being in close proximity to precarious situations, which may increase the risk of injury.

Normal operating procedures

You can use the findings of the risk assessment to compile the normal operating procedures. These should clarify the protection systems to be used eg nets, ropes, spotting.

Technical advice

If the activity falls beyond the experience of management it is a good idea to get advice from appropriately experienced and qualified people.

First aid

As well as normal first aid facilities it is a good idea to have scenario-based training using actual elements to identify the problems that particular situations may present.

Emergency action plan

This could be integrated with the scenario-based training mentioned under 'First aid'.

References

¹*Maintenance of ropes courses* Information sheet ETIS15 HSE Books 2002

Adventure activities centres: five steps to risk assessment HSE Books 1999 ISBN 0 7176 2463 3

Safe use of work equipment. Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998. Approved Code of Practice and guidance L22 (Second edition) HSE Books 1998 ISBN 0 7176 1626 6

Further information

You can obtain further advice and guidance from the following organisations:

Ropes Course Developments Ltd, Hollands Farm, Tincton, Dorchester DT2 8QP, Tel: 0870 429 6980, Fax: 0870 429 6980, e-mail:rcd@rcd.co.uk

PGL, PGL Travel Ltd, Alton Court, Penyard Lane, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire HR9 5GL, Tel: 01989 764211, Fax: 01989 765451, e-mail:enquiries@pgl.co.uk

Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA), 17 Lambourne Crescent, Cardiff Business Park, Llanishen, Cardiff CF14 5GF, Tel: 02920 755715, Fax: 02920 755757, e-mail: info@aala.org

AAIAC statement on risk perception in adventure and outdoor activities is available on the internet at www.hse.gov.uk/spd/content/spdleis.htm

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the references listed in this publication, their future availability cannot be guaranteed.

This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

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