

## Youth Lead Climbing

### A summary of the NICAS Seminar workshops

In recent years many climbing walls have seen a downward trend in the age that young climbers are learning to lead climb. This is as a result of a number of reasons: improved levels of coaching and the emergence of squads and academies, an increasing focus on longer term bookings for young climbers with regular clubs and the pressure from schemes such as NICAS encouraging youngsters to progress their skills.

The workshops posed the following questions:

- What is an appropriate age to start lead climbing?
- Are young lead climbers a higher risk to themselves and others?
- How do we assess their readiness to lead climb and lead belay?
- Should we treat lead climbing and lead belaying separately?
- What should instructors, coaches and climbing wall management do to protect themselves legally and minimise their liability?
- How should U18s be taught and managed differently from adults?

#### **Feedback from walls on ages and policies**

Much discussion occurred around this topic and there was a fair variety of policies regarding ages in relation to lead climbing, back-up systems, levels of supervision and being signed off to climb unsupervised. Almost all attendees had young climbers under the age of 14 both lead climbing and belaying at their walls, though there was variance over how they were managed and supervised. Most of the workshop attendees noted that the BMC and ABC currently recognise the age of 14 as being an appropriate lower age that minors could be left to climb totally unsupervised. Going below this age would require some sound reasoning based on supporting evidence but is not unheard of.

The common policy adopted by most walls was that each individual needed to be assessed on a case by case basis as to their suitability and aptitude for lead climbing before training began. No hard age policy or guideline did emerge from the discussions. All were agreed that assessment of suitability was paramount where age became just one factor to consider. Many walls reported lead climbers and belayers of ages 11-13 with a couple down to ages as low as 8 (with close management). Some walls had a policy of only permitting young climbers to mock lead until a certain age.

Some walls reported a conflict between their centre policies and the smooth progression of their younger students through the NICAS scheme. Specifically the attainment of level 4 could create a hiatus if centre policy did not permit independent lead climbing and belaying below a certain age.

#### **Risk assessment of individuals**

Policies and procedures come about by making informed risk assessments- of the activity, the participants, and the management techniques employed. Policies and procedures are a codified general response to pre-described risks. This approach works well in top roping

situations where the risks are easy to predict with a variety of participants, and the methods to control these risks are fairly straightforward to reproduce.

The risks on a lead climb can vary greatly over a matter of seconds however, and the ability of instructors to control them is much reduced. Standard procedures alone are not flexible or responsive enough to deal with this more dynamic activity. Instead it demands that instructors and supervisors have highly developed risk assessment and judgement skills of their own to manage the situation safely. All the delegates agreed that this was the key factor in managing young lead climbers (or indeed of any age).

### **What is the risk with younger climbers?**

There are obviously extra factors to consider when assessing a young climber's suitability to begin lead climbing:

- Do they have the motor skills to handle the more complex nature of lead belaying? Can they move smoothly enough to lead and clip with one arm safely? Do they have the motor control to clip efficiently?
- Do they have the basic strength to hold on in control while clipping? Do they have the grip to hold a falling climber? Are they of an appropriate weight to hold the lead climber?
- Do they have enough mental concentration to focus on belaying and climbing safely?
- Are they able to risk assess the progress of a climb or climber and be able to react appropriately?
- Do they have the maturity to be responsible for a lead climber's safety in a consistent manner?

Young brains and bodies take time to develop all these skills and attributes and we should be able to tick all these boxes before exposing young participants to increased risk. The law recognises this fact and places a higher duty of care on instructors and management where minors are involved. This duty of care works on a declining scale up to the age of 18 in England and Wales and to 16 in Scotland. At this point, providing the risks have been properly explained and understood, the adult is deemed responsible for their own actions (and subsequent results). A child of ,say, 12 however is unlikely to be seen as fully responsible for their actions on account that they are less able to risk assess and fully accept/appreciate the consequences of their actions for themselves.

### **The legal perspective**

What is the liability of an instructor/ supervisor/ wall management if a minor-deemed competent by them, drops another individual lead climbing? A number of legal experts have been consulted by the ABC over this issue (see the ABC discussion paper- Under 14 Leading and Belaying, Reid A. 2010) The vexed issue of minors lead belaying others has caused most discussion. Legal opinion has found it difficult to cite similar examples of activity where one minor has a crucial role in the safety system for another and so definitive advice has not been forthcoming. (However; scrum's collapse, cricket balls bounce in the face and horses throw young riders off all the time). In most cases we are told that as climbing instructors we are the experts and therefore we will have to defend our judgement. There is no magic shield. Instead we will need to stand up and defend ourselves by demonstrating that we have taken all *reasonable* steps to fulfil our duty of care to all involved.

There are four interest groups that we would have to explain ourselves to:

**Who will judge us:**

- 1) The Law and its applying bodies. Can we produce guidelines and procedures sufficient to protect us from claims of Negligence (a duty of care is owed – that duty has been breached and injury has resulted)? Unlikely.
- 2) Parents / Guardians. They will need to be informed and consent to the specific risks of these activities
- 3) Peers. As professionals we must be comfortable with and be able to support our colleagues judgements and actions; especially in the face of questions and a legal challenge.
- 4) Society. Trial by media and the uninformed.

In the end I feel we need to demonstrate that we have fulfilled three pillars of our duty of care – and there need to be records of each if you ever are going to present a good defence.

**The three pillars of duty of care – assessment, consent, management**

1. **Assessment:** Before allowing a young person to lead climb, a judgement as to their suitability will have to be made. We should be able to point to a history of competent climbing in order to make this judgement having considered all the factors mentioned above. The NICAS logbook is a great help here; coupled with booking records this can also record training and supervision. The climber should demonstrate their capabilities on a continuous assessment basis rather than just at key moments so that an instructor can make a considered judgement over time. This needs to be recorded on a subsequent consent form. The assessing instructor needs to be suitably trained and experienced to make this initial judgement.
2. **Consent:** Informed parental consent is an essential issue, especially if the parents/guardians are not climbers. I find that parents do not always fully appreciate the difference between the risks and responsibilities of lead climbing over top roping unless explicitly described to them. Some walls arrange a meeting with the student and their parents and get the student to describe the risks to their parents in the presence of the member of staff. This demonstrates that the student understands the risks and that all have witnessed the acceptance of these risks by the parents. A consent form describing the risks including the acceptance of peer belaying is signed by them and held by the wall. The form can also have an assessment for readiness to lead/belay signed by a member of staff.

It was suggested that the ABC could look into drafting a standard form of this type with notes for parents.

In addition to these consent forms some walls have a photo ID card system for those young climbers who have been signed off to climb without supervision. Attached to the harness this allows any staff to identify the young climber and to ascertain what they are signed off to do (top rope, boulder, lead climb) even if they do not personally know them.

3. **Management** Due to their enhanced duty of care, instructors need to manage young lead climbers in a more structured way than with adults. There is a process of learning and skill acquisition that all students undergo – though at different rates.

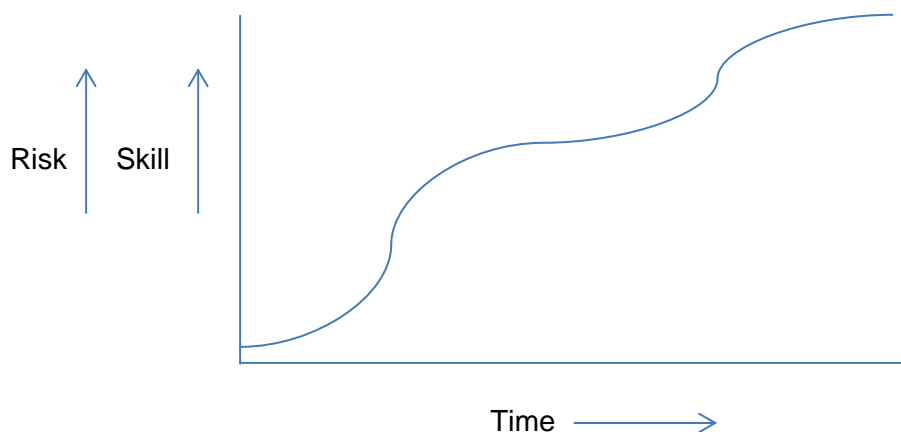
This can be broken down into discrete blocks and coached and assessed in a systematic way. Some record of this (again, the NICAS logbook is useful in this regard) would go a long way to demonstrating the thought and care put into the process. Some walls have a register of participants and, in addition to logbook entries, also record lead falls held (whether practiced or for real) with a date and signature. If supervised/training sessions begin with a briefing and end with a logbook review this is not a burdensome task.

## Skill Acquisition

Most skills are acquired through a learning process that follows five broad stages:

1. Awareness – the new skill is communicated / demonstrated and the student comes to understand the process as an idea. eg: how to lead belay
2. Functional- the student can perform the skill with careful thought by modelling but it is mechanical in its execution. This can look skilled enough to the untrained eye but still involves cognition and is easily disrupted by any distraction. Eg: early days lead belaying.
3. Practiced- the student can now perform the skill with apparent fluidity due to massed practice. Providing the experience is very limited in its variety they can manage the skill fairly consistently. Eg: smooth lead belaying on the same routes with the same rope and belay device with the same partner. However unfamiliar situations will compromise performance.
4. Varied – the student learns to perform the skill in a variety of environments with a number of different variables. Thought is needed to problem solve unfamiliar situations. Eg: practicing lead belaying and holding falls with different partners, ropes, hands, devices and climbs (and in outdoor environments)
5. Skilled – a fully skilled performance occurs in a wide range of environments where the skill is performed automatically and appropriately eg: able to judge and perform a dynamic belay smoothly in a wide range of situations with little or no warning.

These stages of skill development could be recorded for the key skill of belaying. Unlike with adults it is not enough to say to minors: 'you are now at stage 3, good luck with the next two'. Instead they need to be managed appropriately for each stage. Thus at stage one they need to be directed (and practice without bodies attached), at two they need to be directly supported, at three and four- backed up by first an instructor and then maybe a peer, stage five - left alone but given feedback when appropriate.



As novice climbers develop their skills over time they do so at varying rates at various times during the learning process. A coach needs to identify where on this wiggly line they are and provide appropriate training, supervision, practice and review at each stage. Good management therefore needs individual coaching plans with constant review. An experienced coach will develop a toolkit of coaching and supervision strategies designed to progressively introduce and manage the increasing risk of lead climbing independently. By breaking down the activity into its constituent skills coaches can focus on each one in turn and build up skills progressively.

The easy mistake to make is to jump up the skill curve too quickly eg: moving from leading on vertical walls to leading on steep walls without further developing clipping skills, getting used to the more intimidating environment, learning to find rests on steep ground and so on.

### **Lead climbing skills and coaching strategies**

Below are some skill components and some ideas for coaching these:

*Movement* – top roping steep routes, stable triangles - bouldering games to develop these in various positions (eg: putting on helmets whilst hanging on the wall, picking up and placing balls, slings, carabiners etc, writing on laminated sheets and so on), floor exercises (ABCs), downclimbing (develops footwork), slow motion climbing – the list goes on.

*Breathing* - singing/talking up a route, power breathing, breathing exercises before climbing

*Focus* – the ball passing game (The group stands in a circle and the coach throws a ball across the circle. The ball is caught and passed across the circle to a different person until it has gone all the way back to the coach via everyone in the group. Then the coach keeps introducing more balls – see how many you can keep going without dropping one.)

*Clipping* – practice at floor level, clipping left and right handed, long/short clips, blind clipping, clipping while hanging off the wall, clipping on traverses, drag lining on vertical and then steep walls, placing quickdraws, clipping bolts on circuits with short rope, awkward clips set with slings in the bouldering wall, different quickdraw designs, varying clipping heights.

*Route reading* – stick game, speed climbing, finding rests, identifying clipping holds (use a laser pen), when to push on, reversing, visualisation and physical rehearsal on the ground.

*Risk assessment* – falls below the 3<sup>rd</sup> clip, pre-clipping runner 1 and 2, demonstration of fall landings with clipping height using top rope and lead rope, down climbing, spotting fall hazards (fins, overhangs, features, swings, ledges), rope management, inversion

*Falling* – top rope falls, big top rope falls with second slack back up top rope, progressive lead top rope falls (from sagging to missed clip and 'slap and drop'), fears in a box.

*Belay technique* – belaying a down climber on top rope, left hand/right hand, different devices, rope, crab combinations, anticipation –belaying a traversing climber on a bouldering wall, belaying a walking climber on the floor (rope not allowed to pull climber or touch the floor).

*Belayer movement* – coach guides belayer with hands, marks on floor to show foot positions, boulder wall/floor exercises as above, top rope downclimber with one quickdraw clipped at bottom

*Holding falls* – different ropes, devices and partners, use slack double top rope system for multiple practice, dynamic belaying, being lifted off the ground with back up. Holding falls with and without warning (climber doesn't look over shoulder!)

*Belayer observation* – z clips, back clips, missed clips, rope behind leg, and how to deal with these

Video analysis is quick and easy to do with modern video cams, smart phones and tvs

### **Belay devices**

There was some debate over the most appropriate devices for young lead belayers to use. Most walls used an ATC XP type device. There was general agreement that the Gri Gri whilst semi-locking can be easily misused and is more dangerous for lowering. Other devices such as the Faders Sum were considered better in this regard. Some interesting new devices such as the Click Up are worth investigating as they have semi-locking properties without cams and release handles.

### **Implications for NICAS**

Young climbers may need to slow down at level 3 and take more time to consolidate their general climbing skills before moving onto level 4. During this time many of the exercises above could be introduced to develop foundation skills for lead climbing before going on to level 4. Level 4 could also be practiced on slack top rope for a considerable proportion of its time. The board could consider lead belaying only becoming a requirement at level 5, though training could still occur at level 4. Some delegates suggested multiple tick boxes in the logbooks to help record consistent performance in key skills over time.

### **Conclusion**

Whereas young climbers will always present a greater liability than adults due to the higher duty of care required they do not have to present a higher risk if appropriately managed. Clear assessment of the suitability of candidates by appropriately trained staff; informed parental consent; records of assessment, consent, training, and experience; and stepped management based on the observation of skill acquisition should fulfil this duty of care adequately.

GJ January 2011