

## The Safety Management of Peer Belaying

by Anne Salisbury

**As an Adventure Activities Licensing Authority inspector for the past two years, I and the other inspectors have been able to observe many sessions of climbing, and climbing related activities, and it is reassuring that the vast majority of what we see is good safe practice. This article has arisen from the workshop presentation I made at the IOL Northern Region Conference in January 2005.**

The workshop presented some of the issues surrounding group members belaying one another – called ‘peer’ belaying, by giving examples of observations which would be considered to be at the poorer end of practice. The aim of this article is to re-iterate these examples to provide food for thought, and promote active discussion across the field about managing sessions where group members ‘peer’ belay.

The Licensing Authority inspectors are all passionate about outdoor and adventurous activities, and about encouraging as much participation as possible. We continue to support appropriately managed peer belaying sessions by sharing best practice and advising on potential problems.

Licensing Authority inspectors are required to look at the overall culture of safety of any adventure activity provider, so we observe licensable as well as non-licensable activity. Many of the peer belaying sessions fall outside the scope of licensing.

**Licensable** - climbing activity taking place on natural rocks outdoors – often led by Single Pitch Award (SPA) holders or Southern Sandstone Award (SSA) holders, although some local accreditation schemes exist for site specific crags.

**Non-licensable** – everything else, artificial climbing walls, abseil towers, Jacobs ladder, ropes course elements etc. – often ‘in house trained’ staff as well as SPA or SSA holders.

### Learning and Safety Quality

Two of the issues in any situation where group members are belaying are:

1. the learning quality – Why are they doing it? and
2. the safety quality – How are they doing it?

Many of you will be concerned with both the quality of the learning as well as the safety. It is the job of the Licensing

Authority inspector to focus on safety quality and to make a decision about whether a provider demonstrates an overall culture of safety which includes deciding if an activity is safe enough.

Outdoor Education prides itself on allowing young people to take responsibility for their actions in 'real' situations', in order that the participants see the consequences of these actions. Climbing and climbing related activities have the potential to demonstrate all too clearly what the consequences of poor belaying can be.

Falling from a height is a foreseeable hazard for all climbing related activities. Safety procedures should adequately and appropriately cover this risk. This includes making participants aware of the risks and organising, supervising and managing peer belaying appropriately.

Safety problems in peer belaying situations are not always huge and not always black and white. The Licensing Authority, through its contacts across the outdoor community, also becomes aware from time to time of other incidents or accidents in climbing related activities and, as a result of some higher profile accidents, inspectors have been monitoring this type of activity for some time.

## Observed Examples

Here are five actual examples of the types of observation made by Licensing Authority inspectors which have the potential to lead to accidents. Each one is included to illustrate a particular point. In all instances the climbers are novices.

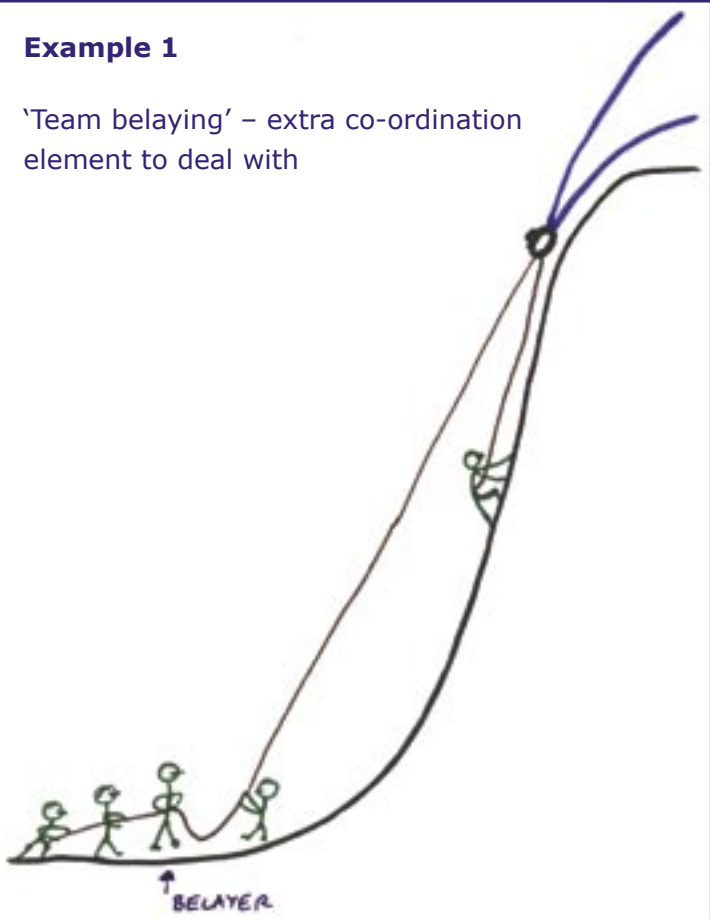
### Example 1

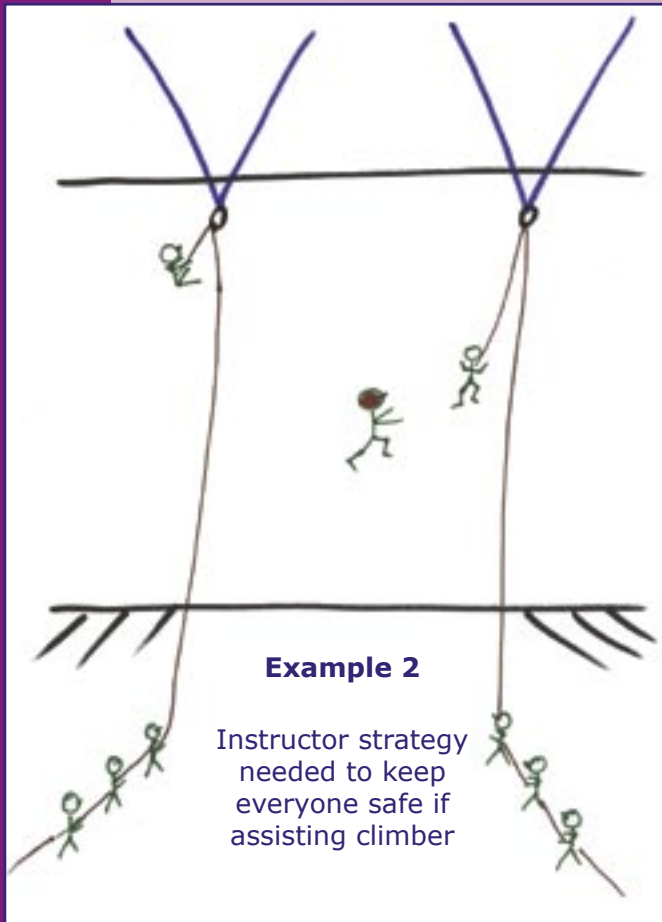
A 'bell ringing' peer belaying system when one child pulls the live rope down, another pulls it through the belay device, and another one or two tail the rope. This system can easily create slack on the live rope side of the belay device unless the groups co-ordination of the belaying movement is good and carefully monitored throughout. This co-ordination element is key here. This is the method seen poorly done most often. It could be called Team Belaying! I have seen the down pulling child almost receive burnt hands when they had not understood to let go if the climber fell. It is also in my opinion the most difficult to supervise well, especially if two or three ropes are deployed.

**This example gives the supervisor and participants an extra co-ordination dimension / problem to deal with.**

### Example 1

'Team belaying' – extra co-ordination element to deal with

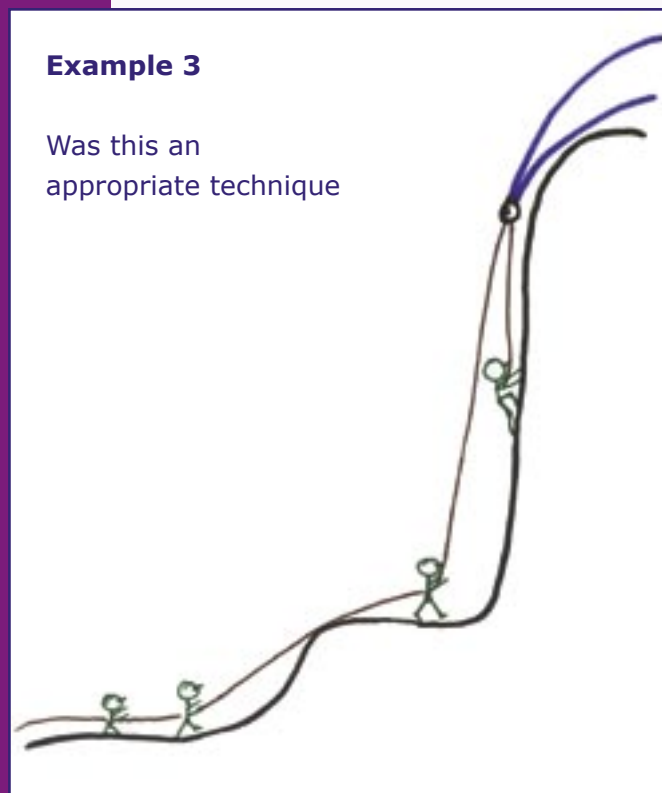




### Example 2

The instructor has two ropes of 'team belaying' taking place in fairly close proximity. One of the climbers was having difficulty and so the instructor climbed up to a point where they were adjacent to the climber. Both groups of team belayers continue unsupervised including the other climb where the climber is about to be lowered.

**This example gives an instructor strategy problem. When instructors physically move to help those climbing there must be strategies in place to ensure everyone's safety.**



### Example 3

A session using 'team belaying' where the belayer pulled the rope down and the tailers pulled it through the Italian Hitch. The belayer was at the foot of the climb and the two tailers were down a bank some 3-4 metres away. The Italian Hitch was on the belayers harness with no ground anchor and so this child could easily have been pulled off their feet with the angle created in the rope.

**This gives an example of a problem about appropriate technique.**

#### Example 4

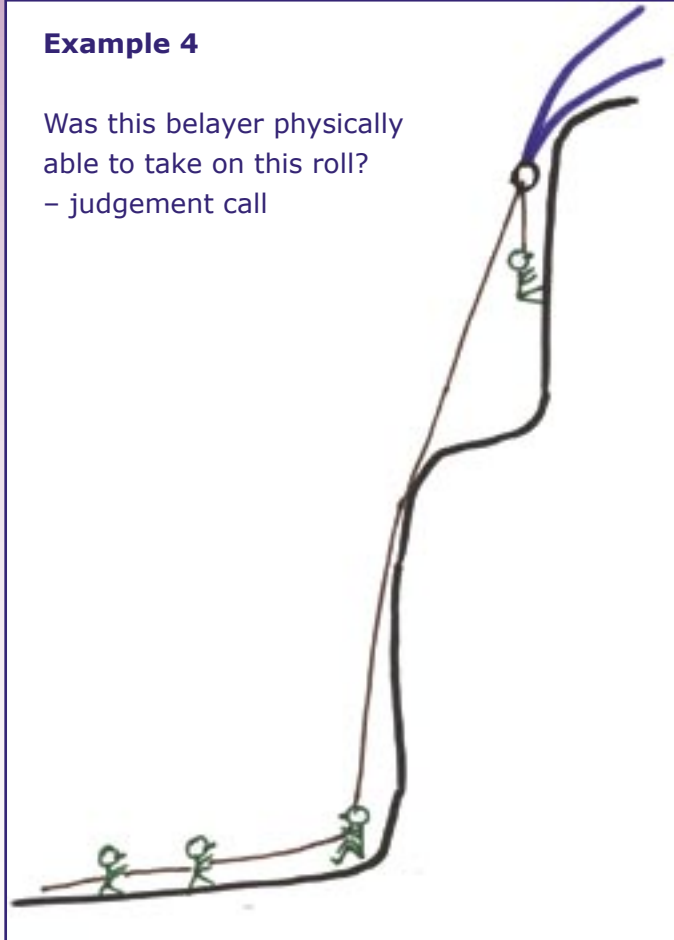
This was a bottom roping session outdoors. The climb observed had a ledge in it. The small girl belaying at the foot of the climb was sitting with her back to the climb and pulling the rope down. The two tailers were facing her and able to see the climber, as they pulled the rope through the belay device. The belay child kept getting her helmet and head hit by the rope and was crying as her harness was cutting into her especially when the climber descended.

**Although this in essence appears to be an example of a safe method, the issue of whether this particular child was physically up to being the belayer was a judgement call by the instructor. Judgement problem.**

#### Example 4

Was this belayer physically able to take on this roll?

– judgement call



#### Example 5

(two diagrams given - second is overleaf)

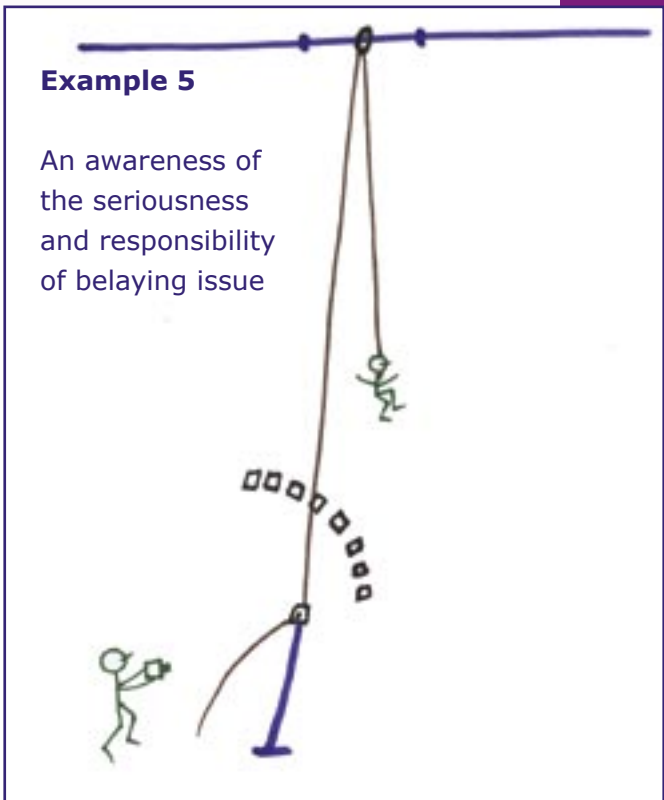
With older children, sessions where one child belayed one climber and the instructor monitored. In two separate instances inspectors have seen the belayer let go of the dead rope to do something else, one was for the belayer to shake someone's hand and the second was to take a photo. In both instances the climber did not fall.

**These examples perhaps demonstrate a problem of an awareness of the seriousness and responsibility of belaying.**

Essentially these examples mostly refer to **safety management** issues.

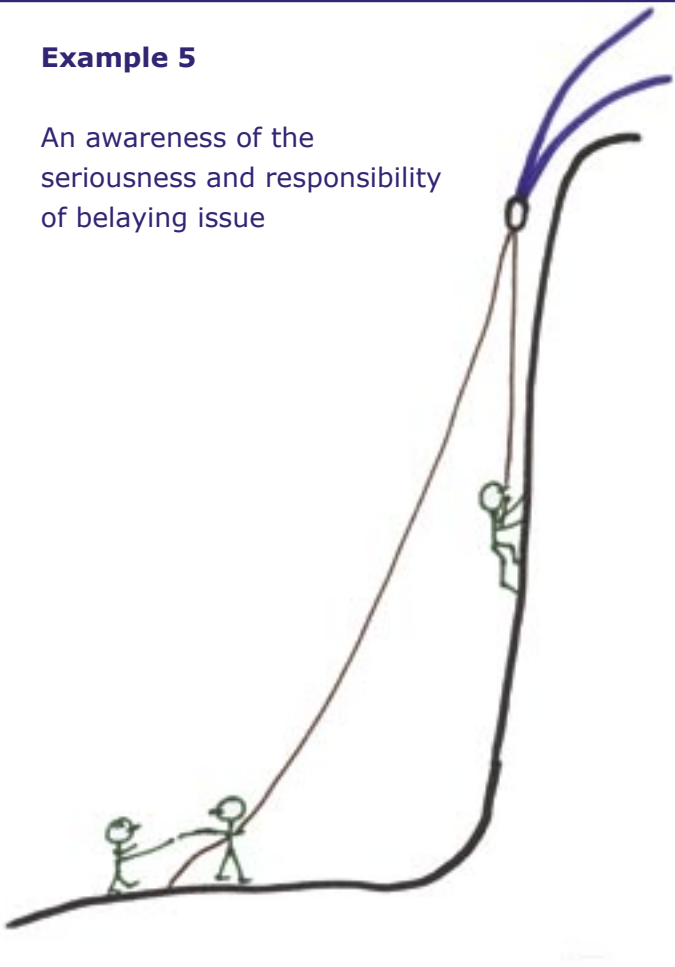
#### Example 5

An awareness of the seriousness and responsibility of belaying issue



### Example 5

An awareness of the seriousness and responsibility of belaying issue



3. When was the instructor last monitored running such a session? When were they **trained**, have they had any **further training/experience** with particular attention to peer belaying issues?

### Factors with the potential to affect the safety management of climbing and climbing related activities

1. **Length of session** – There is a trend for shorter taster sessions, leaving little or no time for teaching essential safety skills.
2. **Age and ability of young people** – With primary aged children, are they strong enough to take on one to one belaying? Is team belaying compounding difficulties by adding a coordination element? The group can be easily distracted. In 'team belaying' each child is a small part of the belay system, so no individual responsibility is given. Groups can easily become bored and stop concentrating.

## Safety Management

From a safety management point of view, inspectors must ask themselves **three** things:

1. Have the young people had sufficient **training** in the techniques used for belaying; are these techniques **appropriate** and are they aware of the **seriousness** of poor belaying?
2. Is the group **appropriately supervised**? Position of supervisor, ratios, staff experience and qualifications? Has the supervisor/instructor the **judgement** to know when a young person is not capable of peer belaying, or when to step in and hold the rope or give very close supervision.

3. **Skills taught** – what skills are taught? Is the seriousness and responsibility in terms of actions and consequences in the role of the belayer emphasised enough?
4. **The aim of the session** – Is this soft skill based? Does there need to be an element of hard skills training/input whatever the desired outcome?
5. **Belay methods used** – Are they appropriate for the group and the venue?
6. **Supervision** – Poor supervision of peer belaying has more potential than many other activities for accidents.

**7. Communication** – A good system is needed for communication between instructor and group, instructor and individuals, and between the climber and their belayers. When instructors are not holding the rope, their voice is their management tool. Crucially, instructors need to choose words, phrases or images which the young people will be able to understand, and use them systematically, especially at the changeover point from climbing to being lowered.

I hope this article raises awareness of the issues observed in peer belaying situations, promotes some debate about good and best practice and encourages everyone to be vigilant to prevent any serious occurrences. ■

## Questions arising from the workshop

1. Are we expecting too much from newly qualified SPA, SSA or 'in house' trained staff in terms of good judgement and the safety management of groups peer belaying?
2. How do we check on the judgement of climbing activity supervisors/instructors?
3. Is team belaying the most appropriate technique for less experienced staff to supervise and monitor, or for young novices to master and understand?
4. What is the aim of the session? If it is team building, are there more suitable activities than climbing to use as tools for this?
5. Should newly qualified instructors be more closely monitored in terms of group management and judgement skills?

### Notes

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### Illustration

#### Info.

By the author