Challenge Courses: Safety Activity Checkpoints

A challenge course is a set of structures that provide a setting for physical challenges designed to increase participant self-confidence and physical coordination, increase group cooperation, and have fun.

- **Initiative games** and **low elements** require the group to work together to accomplish mental or physical challenges; spotters safeguard the movements of each member of the group.
- **High ropes** challenge courses involve components for individual or group challenges that are 6 feet or more off the ground. A safety belay (rope to secure a person to an anchor point) is used with a harness, and a helmet is worn by the participants. Spotters (participants who safeguard the movements of a member of the group) provide support and protect the head and upper body of a climber in case of a fall.

Each participant must possess the physical strength and technical skills to use the equipment, and must understand the safety procedures and consequences of her actions. Challenge courses are not recommended for Girl Scouts Daisies; Girl Scout Brownies may participate only in low-elements activities.

Know where to find challenge courses. Connect with your Girl Scout council for site suggestions. Also, the Association for Challenge Course Technology provides a list of companies that have completed its Professional Vendor Member accreditation processes.

Include girls with disabilities. Communicate with girls with disabilities and/or their caregivers to assess any needs and accommodations. Learn more about the resources and information that the National Institute on Recreational Inclusion provides to people with disabilities.

Challenge Courses Gear

Basic Gear

- ☐ Sturdy shoes
- ☐ Long pants or bike pants are recommended for activities when skin abrasions on legs are possible
- ☐ Close-fitting clothing (avoid wearing loose clothing, especially around the head and neck)

Specialized Gear

- ☐ All equipment used for belaying—ropes, webbing, harnesses, hardware, helmets—is designed, tested, and manufactured for the purpose of this type of activity and appropriate for the size of the user.
- ☐ A chest harness with seat harness or full-body harness is recommended for younger girls when climbing.
- ☐ Climbing helmets are worn in climbing activities in which the participant is more than 6 feet off the ground and/or on belay. In addition, participants standing in the "fall zone" beneath a climbing element wear helmets. Climbing helmets that have the UIAA-approved label (Union of International Alpine Association) must be worn for all climbing situations where the participant is more than 6 feet off the ground and/or on belay. It is recommended that a disposable liner, such as a shower cap or surgical cap, be worn underneath the helmet to protect against the spread of head lice.

Prepare for Challenge Courses

- ☐ **Communicate with council and parents.** Inform your Girl Scout council and girls' parents/guardians about the activity, including details about safety precautions and any appropriate clothing or supplies that may be necessary. Follow council procedures for activity approval, certificates of insurance, and council guidelines about girls' general health examinations. Make arrangements in advance for all transportation and confirm plans before departure.
- ☐ **Girls plan the activity.** Keeping their grade-level abilities in mind, encourage girls to take proactive leadership roles in organizing details of the activity.
- ☐ **Arrange for transportation and adult supervision.** The recommended adult-to-girl ratios are two non-related adults (at least one of whom is female) to every:
  - 12 Girl Scout Brownies (low-elements only)
  - 16 Girl Scout Juniors
  - 20 Girl Scout Cadettes
  - 24 Girl Scout Seniors
  - 24 Girl Scout Ambassadors

  Plus one adult to each additional:

  - 6 Girl Scout Brownies (low-elements only)
  - 8 Girl Scout Juniors
  - 10 Girl Scout Cadettes
  - 12 Girl Scout Seniors
  - 12 Girl Scout Ambassadors
- ☐ **Verify instructor knowledge and experience.** An instructor with documented experience, indicating competence in equipment maintenance, safety and rescue techniques, proper use of the course and hands-on training directly supervises the group. Ensure that the instructor-to-participant ration meets or exceeds minimum standards, as identified by the original manufacturer or installer of the challenge course and/or is in compliance with current industry standards. Ensure that the instructor has provided written documentation of the completed training, there is a regular process of review and update for all instructors, and a minimum of two instructors are present. Instructors are skilled in selecting appropriate activities, teaching and supervising spotting and belaying techniques, and modifying tasks to provide an appropriate experience for the ages and skill levels in the group. Before use, instructors inspect all equipment, course components, and landing areas in the activity area.
- ☐ **Compile key contacts.** Give an itinerary to a contact person at home; call the contact person upon departure and return. Create a list of girls' parents/guardian contact information, telephone numbers for emergency services and police, and council contacts—keep on hand or post in an easily accessible location.
- ☐ **Prepare for emergencies.** Ensure the presence of a waterproof first-aid kit and a first-aider (level 1) with a current certificate in First Aid, including Adult and Child CPR or CPR/AED; who is prepared to handle cases of injury from falls as well as abrasions and sunburn. A first-aider (level 2) is present for high-ropes courses. A sharp knife, hardware, and extra rope of appropriate length for rescue are available at the site. Emergency transportation is available; if any part of the activity is located 60 minutes or more from emergency medical services, ensure the presence of a first-aider (level 2) with Wilderness and Remote First Aid. Specialized safety

and rescue procedures are planned and practiced to ensure the ability to remove a participant from a high-ropes, rappelling, or climbing situation. See *Volunteer Essentials* for information about first-aid standards and training.

- ☐ **Dress appropriately for the activity.** Sharp objects, jewelry, and watches are removed and pockets emptied. Long hair is pulled back from the face and fastened under the helmet to prevent tangling.

On the Day of the Challenge Course Activity

- ☐ **Get a weather report.** On the morning of the activity, check weather.com or other reliable weather sources to determine if conditions are appropriate. Be prepared to alter the activity plan or have an alternate activity prepared if weather conditions change. Write, review, and practice evacuation and emergency plans for severe weather with girls. In the event of a storm, take shelter away from tall objects (including trees, buildings, and electrical poles). Find the lowest point in an open flat area. Squat low to the ground on the balls of the feet, and place hands on knees with head between them.
- ☐ **Use the buddy system.** Girls are divided into teams of two. Each girl chooses a buddy and is responsible for staying with her buddy at all times, warning her buddy of danger, giving her buddy immediate assistance if safe to do so, and seeking help when the situation warrants it. If someone in the group is injured, one person cares for the patient while two others seek help.
- ☐ **Ensure that equipment is well-maintained.** There is a documented maintenance schedule and periodic inspection by instructors and outside professionals of all artificial structures and equipment used in the activities. A use log is kept on all equipment subject to stress, wear, and deterioration. A written equipment monitoring and retirement process is established and followed.
- ☐ **Girls learn about and prepare for challenge courses.** Instructors teach a set of readiness and action commands to all participants for climbing, spotting, and belaying. All participants utilize gentle muscle warm-up and stretching activities before beginning physical activities. Instructors describe the objectives, safety procedures, and hazards to the participants before beginning an activity.
- ☐ **Girls practice safe challenge-course techniques.** Spotting techniques are taught, demonstrated, and practiced by participants prior to any challenge-course activity. All activities are appropriately spotted. For activities where partners are needed, instructors match participants according to size and skill level, if appropriate. Instructors supervise all tie-ins, belays, and climbs on high ropes courses and spotting on low elements courses. Participants are not stacked more than three levels high vertically (in a pyramid, for example) on each other at any time. No one should stand on the middle of someone else's back.

Challenge Courses Links

- **Association for Experiential Education:** www.aee.org
- **Association for Challenge Course Technology:** www.acctinfo.org
- **International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation:** www.theuiaa.org
- **Project Adventure:** www.pa.org

Challenge Courses Know-How for Girls

- **Focus on team-building.** Challenge courses rely on strong communication and trust. Is your team ready for the challenge?

Challenge Courses Jargon

- **Zip line:** A wire or cable to which a pulley and harness are attached for a rider
- **Belay:** To secure a person or object at the end of a rope