

Autobelay devices

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Issue

AALS has become aware, partly from providers and partly from the Association of Mountaineering Instructors, of some potential issues with the use of autobelay devices.

It appears that there have been occasions when young people, while descending, have caught helmets on large holds. In one case it is believed the helmet strap broke and in another that the instructor soloed up to free the person.

One provider has logged a near miss on their high ropes course where they use an autobelay device to descend from a platform. A young person jumped from the platform rather than step off and as they swung back the instructor realised there was a potential for a leg to be caught in the platform bracing and yet there would be no way to stop the person being lowered. The centre has amended its procedures accordingly.

Outcome

Issues to be aware of are:

- An autobelay device, like any other piece of equipment, needs to be operated by suitably experienced and competent staff. No piece of equipment should be considered foolproof.
- The obvious limitation of an autobelay device is that you cannot stop the lower - once a person's weight is on the device it will lower them at a steady rate. It would seem sensible, therefore, to give consideration to where such devices are sited and used to ensure that they are not used where there is a possibility of an individual being 'hung up' by other equipment, clothing or limbs.
- On climbing walls it would appear good practice to ensure climbers are suitably briefed and have a practice lower from a couple of metres up the wall.

Consideration might be given to whether it is necessary to wear helmets in some situations where autobelay devices are being used. Remember climbing helmets straps are not designed to break easily.