ADVENTURE ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

# AbseILIng

Schools must follow the Department’s Excursion Policy and Guidelines and the requirements outlined in this document when planning, conducting and approving adventure activities.

These guidelines are for developing risk management plans specific to the location, activity and group participating. They are not intended to be used as a training manual. Staff instructing the activity must have sufficient knowledge/expertise in the activity.

Abseiling (sometimes referred to as rappelling) is an activity in which a person descends a rope in a controlled manner with the use of a friction device or descender.

Abseiling may be used to descend a cliff face as part of a rock-climbing program or it may be practised as a separate activity.

These guidelines apply to abseiling on natural rock cliffs, not on artificial structures. For abseiling on artificial structures see the guidelines for Artificial Climbing and Abseiling.

Forward-facing descents (sometimes referred to as Geneva or rundowns) are not recommended.

Rock climbing is the process of ascending cliffs. Separate guidelines have been developed for Rock Climbing.

If an overnight camping component is planned, please also refer to Camping guidelines.

## activity Definitions

**Novice abseilers** – participants who have not previously undertaken abseiling or have not recently abseiled in a similar rock environment.

**Experienced abseilers** – participants who have previously, successfully and confidently undertaken abseiling in a similar environment and are competently able to secure their harness and attach to the abseil and safety ropes.

If staff are unsure about the experience of students they should assume they are novices.

**Multi-pitch / Tram-line abseil** – a descent occurring in stages, requiring participants to change abseil ropes at each stage.

**Active abseiler** – any abseiler that is attaching to or is attached to an abseil and abseil safety line.

**Inactive abseiler** – any participant involved in an abseil activity that is not currently attached to or in the process of attaching to an abseil or abseil safety line.

**Active line** – an abseil line that is under use by active abseilers.

**Belay** – refers to both the system and to the managing of the system that anchors a person who is at height.

## Staffing definitions

**Staff** – any adult approved by the principal who provides supervisory, instructional or educational elements of the activity or excursion. See Excursions Guidelines: Staffing for further details.

**Teacher** – a staff member registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching who provides a supervisory role on a program.

The following roles can be filled by school staff, a teacher or an external provider, or a volunteer (See [Volunteers in Schools](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/volunteers/policy) policy):

**Designated Instructor** – the appointed staff member on a program who provides the lead technical expertise and supervision for the activity.

**Instructor** – a staff member who provides professional, technical expertise and supervision for the activity.

**Assistant Instructor** – a staff member who provides assistance to the instructor(s) in the provision of technical expertise and supervision for the activity. An assistant instructor role may be filled by a volunteer (See: Volunteers in Schools Policy).

## Environment

Rock environments are usually hardened and elevated landscapes commonly referred to as cliffs or crags. Geologically their origins are diverse. The elevation of rock environments offers a vantage point from which unique perspectives can often be drawn. Where surrounding landscapes have been disturbed, rock environments may be a refuge for remnant flora and fauna and thus require sensitive use and management. Vegetation in rock environments is susceptible to damage by human activity and effects can be long lasting.

When selecting abseiling locations, consider:

* the soundness of, and safe access to, anchor points
* a safe area away from the cliff edge/face for anyone who is not participating in the activity
* the ability of the belayer to see the abseiling student throughout the descent.

## Student preparAtion and skills

Planning for activities should begin with an assessment of each students’ current knowledge, skills and experience in rock environments and the activity.

The assessment of students’ current knowledge, skills and experience in the activity should be documented using [Documentation of Participant Preparation, Prerequisite Skills/Knowledge​ ​ (doc - 139kb)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/safety/participrep.doc).

First time abseilers and beginners receive competent instruction in basic skills. Instruction should take into account factors such as activity area conditions, weather, terrain and the progress of students.

The instructor should ascertain the previous experience of each student.

Instructional staff must brief students on:

* equipment, clothing and footwear that is suitable for the activity and location
* safety measures appropriate to control any foreseeable risks associated with the activity and the environment
* minimal environmental impact techniques relevant to the activity and location
* historical and cultural considerations relevant to the activity and location
* activity scope and boundaries
* communication and communication signals
* relevant terminology
* the appropriate use of safety equipment including harnesses, helmets and descending devices
* proper belaying technique and back-up belaying technique
* proper abseil stance for descending safely.

##### Student belayers

The responsibility of belaying must be emphasised. All student belayers must have a belay backup. A belay backup normally consists of another student holding, or also belaying, the belay rope. Belayers must be vigilantly monitored by staff.

If students have been assessed as competent to belay, then students can belay a safety line with a student back up. Any students involved in the belaying of a safety line at the top of an abseil line should be attached to a safety tether.

One instructor can actively supervise two of these abseil lines if in close proximity.

The instructor cannot be actively belaying and supervising a second abseil line

## Equipment

All equipment used must be in sound condition, suitable for the activity and meet applicable industry safety standards as listed below.

A log of use of all climbing equipment must be maintained by the owner.

Abseil safety lines must be used for all novice and experienced abseilers. A bottom break system must not be used at any time in place of an abseil safety line.

##### Belay devices

Belay devices that are in good working order and meet Union Internationale des Associations d’Alpinisme (UIAA) standards or Comite Europeen de Normalisation (CEN) or the Australian equivalent must be used.

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##### Harnesses

Harnesses that meet EN 12277:1998 or the equivalent UIAA or Australian standards. Harnesses must be in good working order and correctly fitted. Students and staff must be vigilant in ensuring that harnesses are correctly refitted between sessions or after removal.

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##### Helmets

Helmets that meet UIAA standards or equivalent CEN (EN 12492) or Australian standard must be worn by all students and staff when rock climbing or in the vicinity of the rock face.

##### Ropes

Approved abseiling ropes are rated as either single (1) or half (1/2) ropes and are normally 50 metres in length. Static ropes (10 mm to 11 mm) are ideal for abseiling. Half ropes are not to be used as the abseil rope. However, dynamic single ropes (10 mm to 11 mm) can also be used for abseiling. Either single (10 mm to 11 mm) or half (8.5 mm to 9 mm) dynamic ropes can be used as belay ropes.

Abrasion of abseil ropes frequently occurs where ropes rub against the cliff. Rope protectors or padding are recommended and help prolong rope life. Any rope protection used must be rigged to ensure it cannot be dislodged onto the abseiler or increase the likelihood of dislodging rocks.

The rope should be secured to the harness according to the harness manufacturer’s instructions.

Belay devices must be attached to harnesses with a locking karabiner.

## Clothing

Gloves may be used at the discretion of the instructor.

Special rock shoes are not necessary for abseiling. Sturdy runners or boots with pliable rather than stiff soles are adequate. Participants must wear shoes at all times.

Glasses should be secured and long hair tied back so as not to be caught in belay device or other equipment. Loose jewellery should not be worn and rings should be taped if not removed.

Hats must not be worn under helmets.

## Experience and qualifications

Staff instructing the activity should have sufficient knowledge and experience of the activity and the activity environment to operate in all reasonably foreseeable conditions.

Staff qualifications must be relevant for both running the activity and the activity set up.

The designated single-pitch abseiling instructor/s must have one of the following:

* a Single Pitch Guide award accredited with the [Australian Climbing Instructors Association](http://www.acia.com.au/)
* equivalent documented abseiling training and experience from another training provider or education institution
* equivalent documented abseiling experience in lieu of certification/accreditation.

These guidelines concern abseiling on natural cliffs, so the instructor/s must be able to rig safe anchor systems and effectively manage belay systems. For this reason abseiling skills in the context of general rock climbing experience are desirable. Instructors must also have recent abseiling experience at the site.

Equivalent training and/or experience includes staff having experience and knowledge of:

* two abseiling locations, including the one to be used
* set up of secure and efficient top rope and abseil teaching systems using a variety of belays and sites
* group management procedures for conducting students safely and efficiently on single-pitch climbs
* self-rescue techniques relevant to single-pitch situations
* site choice in relation to safety, environmental factors and outcome for the participant
* teaching techniques and group management
* environmental and land-management issues.

The designated assistant to the instructor must:

* have experience in the activity at the level being offered to students
* be able to assume a supervisory role during the activity
* have the ability to participate competently in emergency response procedures
* have conferred with the instructor to establish the emergency response and supervision responsibilities.

[Documentation of staff qualifications and experience (doc - 151kb)](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/safety/staffqual.doc) must be used to document staff experience and training in lieu of the listed qualifications.

Where an external contractor is chosen to run all or part of this activity, see: Excursions Guidelines – External Providers.

## Supervision

Supervision is a critical factor in managing risk in the outdoors.

A minimum of two staff members must be present for each activity, one with main responsibility for activity instruction and the other to assist the instructor.

It may be necessary to increase the staff allocation based on ability to observe or monitor students undertaking the activity with consideration to the following:

* students should be directly supervised at the bottom, top and walking route of the abseil line
* there must be one guide/instructor per abseil line. The guide/instructor must control the safety line on each active abseil line. An additional instructor must be added for each additional abseil line
* an instructor cannot be used to supervise non active students
* inactive students (those not directly involved in abseiling) must be supervised according to the following ratios:
	+ 1 staff for up to 11 inactive students
	+ 2 staff for 12–17 inactive students
* for tram line and multi pitch abseiling an instructor must be positioned at each belay point when the abseil line is active.

Consideration must also be given to:

* students (medical conditions, age, physical, mental and emotional maturity, ability and experience)
* group (dynamics and size)
* staff (medical conditions, age, ability and experience, qualifications and skills)
* location (remoteness, communications and known or anticipated environmental conditions)
* ability to see and monitor students at the bottom or top of abseil sites
* the nature of the abseil site travel routes from bottom to top of abseil site.

Reasons for increasing staff allocations must be documented.

The following table shows the minimum staff-to-student allocation that must be used for abseiling activities.

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| --- |
| Up to 12 students – 1 active line (up to 11 non-active students) |
| Total staff | Instructional staff | Supervising staff |
| 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Up to 12 students – 2 active lines (up to 10 non-active students)  |
| Total staff | Instructional staff | Supervising staff |
| 3 | 2 | 1 |

|  |
| --- |
| 13 students – 1 active line (12 non-active students) |
| Total staff | Instructional staff | Supervising staff |
| 3 | 1 | 2 |
| 13 students – 2 active lines (10 non-active students) |
| Total staff | Instructional staff | Supervising staff |
| 4 | 2 | 2 |

|  |
| --- |
| 14 students – 1 active line (13 non-active students) |
| Total staff | Instructional staff | Supervising staff |
| 3 | 1 | 2 |
| 14 students – 2 active lines (12 non-active students)  |
| Total staff | Instructional staff | Supervising staff |
| 4 | 2 | 2 |
| 14 students – 3 active lines (11 non-active students)  |
| Total staff | Instructional staff | Supervising staff |
| 4 | 3 | 1 |

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The teacher in charge is responsible for the supervision strategy, which must be endorsed by the school principal as part of the excursion approval process. Staff members must supervise students according to that strategy, and in accordance with their duty of care. It is the role of the teacher in charge to clearly and adequately explain the supervision strategy to all participating staff members.

Students not directly participating in the activity must be separately supervised in line with Excursions Guidelines – Supervision.

## Peak bodies and expert advice

Australian Climbing Instructors Association <http://www.acia.com.au/>

Outdoors Victoria <https://outdoorsvictoria.org.au/>

Parks Victoria <http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/>

For further enquiries, please contact community.stakeholders@edumail.vic.gov.au

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