

Case 4

Near-miss during zip-wire session

Narrative



An instructor at a zip wire facility was on the take-off platform, checking students and clipping them on prior to them descending the zip wire. Her assistant was at the bottom, and after students had descended, her role was to mount a small platform, then use a ladder to reach and unclip students from the wire.

It was part way through the session and all was going well. Another young boy descended. The assistant climbed the ladder to unclip him, but was having difficulty as the karabiner was jammed. A few moments later she heard a strange humming noise, looked up and saw another boy coming towards her at great speed. Little Johnny slammed into the two of them. Through quick thinking, the assistant held onto the ladder and 'rode' it to the ground. Dazed, she looked up to see the two boys suspended from the cable. They were safe, and fortunately she and the boys suffered only minor injuries. Had the first boy been unclipped at the time of impact, then there could have been a very different outcome.

All challenge courses should have protocols for each of the elements. In this case, although the instructor at the top of the zip wire had been fully trained, she did not perform the checks that she was supposed to; she did not look down the cable to check that it was clear. One quick look would have shown her that the zip wire was not ready for the next participant to descend. As instructors, we want to keep things fun and moving along, this helps keep everyone's interest. In this case the instructor was not fooling around, she simply overlooked a very basic but crucial procedure.

Lessons learned

1. Many accidents and near-misses are caused by staff not following standard procedures, be they written or oral.
2. The redundancy of doing the same moves over and over again can be hypnotic, but consistency is the watchword of a safe programme.
3. One way to help address these sorts of problems is to get the participants themselves to do much of the clipping on, checking that the zip wire is clear, etc, prompted as necessary by staff members who ultimately will check either verbally or physically before launch.
4. When multiple instructors are working together to deliver the same activity, it is important to establish a communications protocol/system to give clear indication of when it is safe to proceed; in this case a simple 'thumbs up' from the Assistant to the Lead Instructor (as per a helicopter winch-man) would have sufficed.
5. Managers should remind staff about the potential hazards associated with 'complacency', especially where regular routine activities are concerned.

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