Challenge and train your hands, feet, body and brain with over 120 activities.
CLIMBING GAMES

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This book is for anyone wanting to have fun climbing while developing crucial skills. The games described can be used to work on specific skills or as fun warm-ups; as an aid to a climbing session or as a session in themselves. Climbing movements can be examined and practised in a safe but challenging environment.

If you are new to climbing, you will find games which introduce some essential skills (such as ‘crimping’ a hold – Chapter 10). If you are an old hand, you will find some great games to help add variety to your weekly club sessions (have you tried ‘The Octopus’? – Chapter 6). Playing some of these games can become addictive as your friends and rivals find new ways to play. The overview of skills used in each game will help you turn play into progress.

BMC participation statement

Climbing, hillwalking and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of this, accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions and involvement.
How to use this book

Each chapter of this book deals with a fundamental climbing technique. Some chapters focus on a particular aspect of a climbing session, e.g. the use of foot or handholds, traversing or roped climbing. You can pick and choose activities from each chapter to suit your session and goals.

Each chapter begins with a brief introduction, followed by a list of all the activities within that section along with their learning goals. The games are listed in a random order.

Many of the games develop more than one aspect of climbing. To help you make the most of them, icons appear beside each title to give you information about the possible ways they can be used at a glance.
Introduction

- Problem solving
- Aerobic activity
- Traversing
- Balance
- Leading skills
- Endurance

- Planning ahead
- Using handholds
- Using footholds
- Teamwork
- Route memory
- Kit know-how

- Resting
- Body awareness
- Core strength
- Communication
- Roped climbing
- Steep ground
Equipment

It goes without saying that you’ll need basic climbing equipment such as harnesses, helmets, belay devices and rock shoes. The list below is far from comprehensive but it does include the items required for the majority of the activities. For specific requirements, refer to the game’s description.

Balls: Tennis balls are particularly useful, as are a selection of larger soft balls.

Tape: A selection of different types of tape (e.g. coloured insulation or Gaffer tape) are useful for a number of the games. You may have to experiment a little with their adhesive qualities on different textured walls.

String: Thin coloured string.

Balloons

Quickdraws: Not all climbing walls have quickdraws in place, so it is useful to have your own. Additionally, they can be taken apart to provide you with the individual karabiners.

Slings (or even just lengths of tubular tape): A width of around 12–16mm provides a useful compromise between good handling characteristics and durability.

Ropes: It is useful to have a few normal climbing lengths of single-rated 10–11mm rope, as well as a few short sections of rope.
Bolt hangers and bolts: These will give you the flexibility to place the hangers exactly where you want them. However, remember that they will be non-load bearing and therefore cannot be used as part of a climber protection system.

Chalk: Packs of old-fashioned coloured and white blackboard chalk.

Hula hoop: Is there one in your garden shed? If not, these can be bought in a wide range of colours from a toy shop.

Goggles: Cheap goggles from DIY stores can be modified in various ways; the simplest and easiest method is with Gaffer tape.

Pointer: This could be a cheap garden cane, a broom handle or a more expensive extendable device.

Stickers: A range of small coloured stickers and address labels are useful. These are inexpensive and available from most stationary outlets.
Safety issues

When leading a session, you will have to judge the safety of your group, the venue and its other users, and the activity. You may also find yourself bound to particular operating procedures or guidelines at the climbing wall, or depending on who you are working for.

Instead of prescribing safety procedures, here is a series of things to consider. Thinking carefully about each of the following statements will help you to make informed decisions to protect the individuals in your care.

When spotting, it is important to remember that you are not there to catch the climber, but to try to protect them from injury.
Peer spotting

Spotting is a skill that even experienced climbers struggle with; the fluidity of climbing requires the ability to react appropriately to the changing situation.

Does having a person spotting actually lead to any reduction in the likelihood of the climber being injured?

Watch what actually happens when you get a group to spot each other: after a few minutes the spotter can get bored and lose concentration.

The person spotting will tend to be either too far away or too close and be holding the person on the wall.

Bouldering is a good method of warming up and gets the whole group going at the same time.

When a group of novice climbers are bouldering, they very rarely fall off; they either step or jump off when they find it too difficult or get tired.

Spotting can halve the number of bodies climbing on the wall at any one time.

A climber will need to learn spotting at some point, so why not straight away?
Wearing a helmet indoors

Climbing helmets are only designed to take impacts from above.

To be of any use, they need to be correctly fitted to the individual.

Is there a chance of a swinging fall into a wall or arête, or of becoming inverted?

Are you wearing one? If the group is, why not you?

Simply wearing a helmet can make people think that the activity is safe and that they cannot be hurt.

Is there a chance of anything falling from above?

Helmets and their fittings can be a hazard, particularly when descending on an auto-belayer. There have been incidents where the climber has snagged poorly adjusted helmet straps on a juggy hold.

Climbing helmets are designed to protect the crown, but offer very limited protection to the back or side of the head.
Supervising a novice belayer

Common sense dictates that you should be happy with the belaying skills of a person before you start climbing with them or letting them belay others. If you have any doubt, give them appropriate instruction and supervise them carefully. If you are using a new game or activity, the novice climber is likely to be paying more attention to the game rather than the belaying or lowering. Tailing the end of the rope is the most common method for backing up a belayer but relies on the person holding the rope to pay attention.

Note that the 'dead' end of the rope is being managed in order to back up the belayer.
Consider climbing in its simplest form, i.e. movement without ropes or safety equipment. What are the skills that may take many years for an individual to discover or develop?

The goal is efficiency. If we are efficient in our movement, we can complete a move or tackle a problem or route without tiring or falling. To be an efficient climber, we need to develop some fundamental skills.

Whether you are a novice who has just completed their first climb or a particularly talented climber who has finally ascended that cutting-edge new route, there are three fundamentals on which we should focus:

- **balance**
- **body awareness**
- **connection points**

Other climbing-related movements spring from these three fundamentals in the form of linked climbing motions such as a rock-over, layback or even off-width crack techniques.
Balance

Maintaining our balance as we move is a basic skill that we have been honing since childhood. However, when presented with new, stressful challenges such as climbing, we tend to forget those lessons learnt so long ago and resort to brute strength and ignorance.

It is often useful to encourage climbers to focus on balance. In most cases, once they are aware of what they should be doing, they will adjust their technique accordingly. For example, once a person is aware that the head is best positioned over the toes when standing up onto a step, they can transfer that thinking to a climbing situation more easily.

A good sense of balance is the key to moving smoothly, efficiently and making difficult climbing moves appear effortless. By being conscious of your centre of gravity when you make a move, you can anticipate the direction of force on a hand- or foothold as you prepare, execute and finish the move.

Balance relies on the core muscles and flexibility. Having good core strength is important for progressing on to steeper overhanging routes and problems.

The key to climbing arêtes is balance.
(Photograph courtesy of Becca Ward).
Body awareness

All coordinated movements require an accurate sense of space, time and force, which can take years to hone. Just how long does it take a child to learn how to walk?

Imagine a shifting and invisible field surrounding your body, reaching to the ends of your limbs during their full range of movement: that is your individual kinesphere. Within this sphere, you will be generally aware of your body’s movements without actually seeing those movements. Can you touch your nose with your eyes closed? As you move, your kinesphere changes shape. It has been defined by past experiences of physical movement patterns and will therefore be unique.

When a person tries a new activity or technique, for example when a climber who predominantly climbs slabs tries their first really steep route, they will find that they are required to perform movements outside of their normal kinesphere. They will struggle and become de-motivated. Giving that person particular activities to extend and train their kinesphere and help with these new movements will improve their performance.

Having a good understanding of how your body can move will allow you to link those difficult sequences.
Connection points

A climber must make efficient use of both hand and footholds in order to make progress on a route. There are of course other points of contact that a climber can use e.g. knee bars and off-width jamming techniques, but since these are more specialised, they are not considered here.

There is a strong relation between how the climber is connected to the rock and their ability to balance. Each new method of standing on or holding different types of hold requires the climber to adjust their body position so that they can remain in balance, either while stationary or during a move.

Handholds

A climber needs to think ahead when using or selecting handholds. Not only do they need to have an understanding of how to use that particular type of hold, but also how they will need to position their body to achieve the best possible results in terms of staying in balance. In addition, they need to be able to use that hold in order to move through to the next hold.

Let people experiment with their handholds. Although you may hold in a particular manner, the same method may not work for others.
Footholds
Many experienced climbers often display particularly poor footwork. Correct and precise footwork feels good when you get it right, as it aids efficiency and saves energy.

The art of using any type of foothold is to achieve the maximum amount of surface area contact while having the foot in the best possible position to allow the ankle a full range of movement. Novice climbers often want to try to stand on the balls of their feet or use their instep; however, this makes things harder as it reduces the movement of the ankle.

By encouraging climbers to stand on their big toes, the ankle is allowed a much wider range of movement. This also allows the more powerful leg muscles to do the majority of the work in order to gain height.

Notice how the climber is focusing on placing their foot accurately. By standing on their big toe a full range of movement can be retained.
Body awareness games

A person’s understanding of body position and awareness of kinesphere have a direct impact on their climbing efficiency. This chapter has a range of activities and games designed to help develop the required awareness.

54 Straight-arm climbing
55 Balloons
56 Getting dressed
57 Musical climbing
58 One-handed catch
59 Octopus
60 Hovering hand
61 Twister
62 Hula-hoop
63 Hip, hip hooray
64 The controller
65 Body circles
66 Unwrap the sweet
Straight-arm climbing 🔴🔴🟢🟢

Climbing with arms straight is a fundamental body position. It allows the body’s weight to be supported by the frame as opposed to the muscles. When clipping bolts and placing gear, it is preferable to do so with straight arms. When climbing on overhanging parts of the wall, the arms should also be kept straight as much as possible. The other major body joints (shoulders, back, hips and knees) should be flexing instead.

On the easiest, slabbiest part of the wall demonstrate climbing up with your arms straight. If a hand is touching a hold then ideally the arm must be straight, although it can sometimes be hard to do this. Novices quickly realise that the only way to climb like this is side-on to the wall, pushing with their legs and pivoting on their hand.

Novices should then progress on to more vertical and overhanging sections. As the climbing gets more difficult, it will be harder to keep the arms straight. Returning to slabby walls can therefore help to remind novices about the body positions they are trying to maintain (side-on, hips close in to the wall) and the joints which should be flexing most.
Balloons

Inflate a balloon and place it either inside or taped to the outside of the climber’s clothing. Have the climbers experiment with the position of the balloons and observe how this additional part of their body affects their positioning on a range of climbs of differing degrees, grade or steepness. This is often a quick and easy method of getting a climber to climb with straight arms and a twisting motion on steeper ground, as they try to keep the balloon away from the wall.

What do you notice about the difference in the climber’s body position?
56 Getting dressed

This works in a similar way to ‘one-handed catch’ but offers more variety in practice. Hang a range of different items of clothing around the wall. The climbers then have to climb to those clothes and put them on or even take them off without touching the ground, making them think about stable body positions.

Notice the straight arm and the wide base of support that the legs are forming.

57 Musical climbing

The climbers move to the rhythm of the music. Slower, more controlled, movements are required for slower music, while faster music means that they have to move dynamically.
One-handed catch

By getting a climber on a wall to catch a soft ball, the climber is required to get themselves into a stable body position. They then have the option to throw the ball back to you or to another climber.

A good stable position will allow the spare hand to be used for something else. Placing gear, perhaps?
Identify two handholds that are level and approximately shoulder-width apart, as well as a single foothold. While holding the handholds and standing on the foothold, have the climber move their body around and try to touch as many different footholds as possible with their spare foot.

**Variations:** Use two footholds and one handhold. Have the climber try to touch as many different holds with their spare hand as possible. Reduce the quality/size of either the handholds, footholds or both. Does this make a difference to the number of holds a particular climber can touch?
To improve the technique of some climbers, you need to slow them down. They must learn to commit completely to the position for each unique move of a route or problem.

The climber ascends a problem which is easy for them. Just before they touch each of the handholds, they must pause with their hand hovering just over it for a count of five. If the climber is unable to do this without struggling, getting out of balance or pulling too hard with the other hand, have them try it on an even easier problem.

Once they can do it on the easier ground, increase the difficulty. Focus the climber on getting that efficient body position before touching each handhold.

Count to five!
Body awareness games

61

Twister

The classic party game can keep a group amused for hours on a climbing wall. Have several climbers positioned on a section of wall with a range of differently coloured holds, well away from each other. Play the game as normal using a standard Twister spinner but have all the climbers moving at the same time. The winner is the climber that stays on the wall for the longest time, without falling or touching another hold.

**Variation:** Use a pair of dice instead. One should have a colour on each face and the other should be marked with left hand, right hand, both hands, left foot, right foot and both feet.

Climbing Twister is good for developing a stable body position.
Hang hula-hoops along a traverse or at different places on a boulder problem. The idea is for the climber to reach the hula-hoop and then pass their body through it, without dropping the hoop or falling off, before continuing with the problem.

By passing through a hula-hoop while traversing, balance can be practised.
“Planning climbing sessions for young people takes a bit of imagination. Climbing Games is a great tool for making sessions more fun and engaging.”  
Dave MacLeod

“An invaluable collection of games and exercises that will appeal to indoor and outdoor instructors alike, helping them structure sessions that inform, build skill-sets and create a fun environment for learning.”  
Paul Twomey  THE CLIMBING ACADEMY

“This is a great new tool for all who instruct, train, assess any aspect of rock climbing, indoors or out!”  
Mal Creasey  MOUNTAIN LEADER TRAINING ENGLAND