Safety Activity Checkpoint
Challenge Course
HIGH-ADVENTURE ACTIVITY: Trip or High-Adventure Approval Form Required

Council Approval: Required

Activity Permitted For: D B J C S A

About Challenge Courses
A challenge course is a set of structures that provide a setting for physical challenges designed to increase participants’ self-confidence and physical coordination, to increase group cooperation, and to be 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 six feet or more off the ground. A safety belay (a rope to secure a person to an anchor point) is used with a harness, and participants wear helmets unless the hosting facility or instructor indicates the use of helmets is hazardous for belay. 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 understand the safety procedures and consequences of her actions. Check the GSNorCal’s Approved Vendor List for vendors who are approved for use.

Note that Daisies and Brownies may participate only in activities designed for their ages, with equipment suitable to the size and ability of each girl. Outdoor high ropes, and high elements are only permitted for Juniors and older.
Learn More:
- Association for Experiential Education
- Association for Challenge Course Technology
- List of accredited vendors: Professional Ropes Course Association

Include Girls with Disabilities and Special Needs
Communicate with girls with disabilities and/or special needs and/or their caregivers to assess any needs and accommodations. Learn more about the resources and information that the National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability provides for people with disabilities and special needs.

Safety Activity Checkpoints

Emergency Action Plan (EAP). Review and document your Emergency Action Plan (EAP) ahead of time before taking girls out for this activity. Think through scenarios of what can go wrong such as an accident, physical injury to a girl, missing girl, or sudden illness.

Verify instructor knowledge and experience. High ropes courses require an instructor trained and certified by a verified agency. The instructor must demonstrate competence in equipment maintenance, safety and rescue techniques, proper use of the course, and hands-on training. Initiative games and low ropes courses require a trained and certified instructor or an instructor with training and documented experience, according to the GSNorCal’s Volunteer Essentials resource.

Qualified instructors will have competence in equipment maintenance, safety techniques, proper use of the course, and hands-on training. Ensure that the instructor has provided written documentation of the completed training as well as proof of participation in routine instructor review and updates. Instructors need to be 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 should inspect all equipment, course components, and landing areas. A minimum of two instructors need to be present.

Ensure that equipment is well maintained. There needs to be 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 should be kept on all equipment that is subject to stress, wear, and deterioration. A written equipment monitoring and retirement process should be established and followed by the facility.

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 should use gentle muscle warm-up and stretching activities before beginning physical activities. Instructors must 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 should match participants according to size and skill level, if appropriate. Instructors must supervise all tie-ins, belays, and climbs on high ropes courses and spotting on low elements courses. Participants must not be stacked more than three levels high vertically (in a pyramid, for example) at any time. No one should stand on the middle of someone else’s back.

Instructor-to-participant ratios must meet the standard as identified by the course manufacturer or installer and need to comply with industry best practice standards.
Prepare for emergencies. Ensure the presence of a waterproof first-aid kit and a first aider with a current certificate in first aid (including adult and child CPR or CPR/AED), who is prepared to handle cases caused by extremes of temperature, such as heat exhaustion, heat stroke, frostbite, cold exposure, and hypothermia, as well as sprains, fractures, and altitude sickness. Ensure that emergency transportation is available, if any part of the activity is located 30 minutes or more from emergency medical services, ensure the presence of a first aider with wilderness first-aid certification. See Volunteer Essentials for information about first-aid standards and training. The designated adult should have a working cell phone for emergencies. [SAFETYWISE: First Aid & First Aiders]

Safety Gear
- Sturdy shoes
- Climbing helmets (with Union of International Alpine Association–approved label) must be worn for all climbing activities in which the participant is more than six feet off the ground and/or on belay and by participants standing in the “fall zone” beneath a climbing element
- Disposable shower cap liner, for use with public rental helmets
- Belaying equipment—including ropes, webbing, harnesses, hardware, and helmets—designed and tested for this type of activity and appropriate for the size of the user
- Long pants or bike pants for activities that may lead to skin abrasions on legs
- Close-fitting clothing (avoid wearing loose clothing, especially around the head and neck)
- No Jewelry—Make sure girls and adults avoid wearing dangling earrings, bracelets, and necklaces that may become entangled in equipment.
- A chest harness with seat harness or full-body harness for small framed girls when climbing

Girl Scouts of Northern California’s Approval Process for Challenge Courses
Challenge Courses are considered a high adventure activity and must be pre-approved by the council.

- **Trip or High-Adventure Approval Form:** Submit the online Trip or High-Adventure Approval Form to council at least 4-6 weeks prior to your activity. Gather the following information to complete this form:
  - Confirmation that your chaperones are registered members of Girl Scouts of Northern California and have a current background check. Troop Leaders can find this information in their Volunteer Toolkit.
  - Name of First Aider and a copy of their current CPR/First Aid certification card. Certification needs to be renewed every two years. If you are hiking or backpacking farther than 30 minutes from a medical facility, please have the information of the member, who is certified in Wilderness First Aid, accompanying your troop.
  - Confirm that the necessary online and in-person courses have been completed for this trip. You can find more information or register for these courses in your Volunteer Learning Portal in the section called Trip & Outdoor Advisor.
    - The Camp Out course is required for all camping trips that involve advanced outdoor cooking or camping trip with girls to a campground or other non-GSNorCal outdoor facility for longer than 1 night without indoor plumbing and electricity. Girls should have already had practice sleeping and cooking outdoors.
    - The Extended Trips course is required for troops traveling three (3) nights or more.
    - The Backpacking course is required before you take girls on an overnight backpacking adventure.

- **High-Adventure Approved Vendor List:** GSNorCal troops/groups must select a high-adventure vendor from the High-Adventure Approved Vendor List, which consists of organizations that meet Girl Scouts safety and insurance requirements for the activity. For the safety of our members, before a troop uses a high-adventure site/vendor for a troop or service unit event, the council must approve the
high-adventure site/vendor. This process is designed to ensure a safe experience and protect the council’s and volunteer’s legal interests.

- **Adding high-adventure facilities to the Approved Vendor List:** If your preferred vendor is not listed on the High-Adventure Approved Vendor list, please follow the simple steps in the [Volunteer Essentials](#) for adding high-adventure vendors.