



# New Jersey School of Conservation

One Wapalanne Road • Branchville, NJ 07826-5115

<http://friendsofnjsoc.org> • [info@friendsofnjsoc.org](mailto:info@friendsofnjsoc.org)

## Confidence Course

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

It should come as no surprise that adolescents have to deal with several unique issues related to personal, interpersonal and social development. This age group places considerable emphasis on developing relationships, to fulfill a need to belong. Adolescents also spend much effort in developing a personal identity; an identity where they feel competent and comfortable. The confidence course can address these issues of personal and social development by fostering a sense of proficiency through personal testing.

Dr. Kurt Hahn borrowed, and modified the idea of obstacle courses from the military to use in a manner that more sharply focused on increasing the participant's level of self-confidence. While touring Belgium, Hahn visited a 16th century church and read an inscription that when translated said, "You have more in you than you know". Hahn believed this deeply, and set out to develop a program that stressed self-reliance and thereby increased participants' self-confidence. The international program Kurt Hahn founded is Outward Bound.

Since Dr. James Merritt built the first course in 1968, the New Jersey School of Conservation has used a confidence course in the Outdoor Pursuits area of their environmental education program. In the ensuing period thousands of students from grade three through doctoral candidates have been through confidence courses at the School. Most have found the course to be challenging, rewarding, and also fun.

### OBJECTIVES:

During the confidence course session we strive to have participants experience "**flow**" or an "optimal experience". Flow theory (as developed by Csikszentmihalyi 1975) describes those times, at work or leisure, when people experience feelings of **enjoyment, concentration, and deep involvement**. Flow theory suggests that any experience will be positive when the participant perceives that the environment incorporates sufficient opportunities for challenge which parallels their own skills. When the challenge and the required skill (relative to participants' abilities) are high, the participant expands his/her capability while learning new skills and increases his/her self-image. Too great a challenge can lead to anxiety, while too little results in boredom. While some anxiety may be good, too much can be detrimental.

Therefore, the objective of the Confidence Course is to encourage each student to put him/herself in an uncomfortable or challenging situation. Because only by trying new things, things you are not quite certain you can do, can anyone expect to bolster their level of confidence. As the challenge approaches the participants' ultimate ability, the better chance for the student to have a "flow or peak experience". Since everyone has their own perception of

what is “challenging”, each student must be allowed to participate or not, and also be free to choose which individual activities at the confidence course best fit their abilities.

The specific objectives of Confidence Course are to provide each student (individually) with the opportunity to:

1. Experience a sense of individual accomplishment by challenging their apparent limits.
2. Set physically challenging, yet realistic individual goals.
3. Responsibly protect group members from harm or injury.
4. Provide positive encouragement and feedback to group members.
5. Demonstrate consideration for the uniqueness of each group member.

Superficially, Confidence Course may seem identical to Group Initiatives. This is not accurate. Although some of the activities may be the same, the objectives and therefore the manner in which they are conducted differs. The primary thrust of the Confidence Course is on the individual pushing their comfort level. In contrast the objective of Group Initiatives is for the group to creatively solve problems as a team.

### **LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

Only those adults who have successfully completed training with the Outdoor Pursuits Specialist at the N. J. School of Conservation are authorized to utilize the confidence course activities. This training must occur without the distractions of school children present.

For maximum effectiveness, a second adult who can effectively spot and manage the group should accompany the leader. This is to allow dividing the group into two sub-groups (one adult managing each sub-group) at the confidence course site, which permits the students more opportunities to challenge themselves at the site. All adult leaders must be diligent in managing the risks to their students. Students can not be expected to consistently and effectively spot without adult supervision. Treat and protect each student as if he/she were your own child. Also the group size is best limited to 12 students, with two hours for the class. As the class size increases, or the length of time decreases, confidence building opportunities become more limited, and the benefits are compromised.

Activities that might be a part of Confidence Course are; Willow in the Wind, Levitation, Cargo Net, Beam, Toxic Waste, Trust Falls, Wild Woosey, and Cable Bridge. The Climbing Wall also serves to elevate self confidence levels, but is not considered a part of the Confidence Course.

The Cable Bridge may also be incorporated into other planned activities outside of Confidence Course such as the science class - River Ramble. Facilitators should therefore be aware of the schedule of the group they are leading so as not to duplicate or lessen the impact of the experience. There is nothing worse than to be planning and emphasizing an activity, only to discover that the group did it earlier in their stay.

Since the students stay at SOC for such a short time, we want them all to benefit from the full range of unique experiences that are offered at the center. Therefore no field group should expect to participate in both the Confidence Course and Climbing Wall. Their time may be put to better use by participating in the wide variety of opportunities that exist at SOC.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The Introduction to the class may begin with a definition of confidence and then a discussion of how we gain and lose it. Confidence is gained by earning it through increasingly difficult tasks.

We lose it primarily through "put downs" from others. Please remember that the students are best able to decide for themselves which activities in the confidence course session best suits them or adequately challenges their abilities.

As a facilitator a review of human and environmental hazards is required. Check each individual for potential hazards such as earrings, cameras, pencils, etc., and any other "human factors" which may lead to an accident. Prior to allowing anyone to participate on any event the facilitator should take the time to check wires and connections and other "environmental hazards" such as ice where spotters need to be. Spread sand or wood chips to improve footing or seek alternative activities. It is negligent to be aware of a hazardous situation and conduct the activity without acting to improve the situation

Other points that should be brought out during the introduction are safety through acting responsibly, and supporting each and every participant. No one can completely commit to doing their best, if they do not trust their group members. A verbal agreement may prove beneficial at this point. Ask the group members if there is anyone who can not spot effectively nor act responsibly. No one has yet admitted this. If a problem arises you can then return to the agreement for discussion.

The strategy we typically use at SOC involves beginning the session with the lowest risk activities and progressing to more difficult challenges. This progression allows the facilitator to witness the group's actions and establish a track record. The leader then has a better idea of the group's ability and is therefore in a better position to make the appropriate decision regarding which activities the group should attempt. Each SOC facilitator is expected to use good judgment when determining which activity the group is both willing and able to participate in. The determining factor is based on the group safety awareness that has been demonstrated during the initial and lower activities. The decisions should lean toward the conservative side!

Therefore the "Willow in the Wind" activity is frequently done first. During this activity the facilitator instructs the class in safe spotting procedures. If a group demonstrates that it can function safely while standing on the ground, we can progress to an activity that is of greater height. When that has been successfully accomplished the group can move on to more challenging tasks. We want each group to experience every challenge we have to offer, yet the safety of the group must be our highest priority. We will also act in a proactive manner to minimize the chance for injury.

There are very few groups that can work through the sequence of activities and still have time for Trust Falls. Trust Falls are the most demanding exercises and therefore have the greatest potential for both growth and injury. We do not teach Trust Falls to visiting teachers, but we ourselves may elect to offer it to the group under our supervision. No one should be considered trained in this activity by mere observation. It is an activity that is rarely experienced due to the expanded confidence course possibilities that now exist at SOC.

Also extreme care must be taken if the facilitator decides to participate in any of the activities. Always consider; Can the group really catch you? If while participating you were injured, would the class be able to effectively react? Does the group know where to get help without walking around the lake three times? These are just some of the many questions you must ask yourself before volunteering to participate.

Please remember that participation in any of these activities is voluntary!

## **Possible Activities (sequence may be altered):**

### ***Willow in the Wind***

The group stands shoulder to shoulder in a circle. They should stand in such a way that they have one foot forward and the other foot back. This position provides a stable foundation. One volunteer stands rigid in the middle of the circle with arms crossed over the chest. Remaining rigid, the volunteer falls in any direction. The group should collectively catch them, and ease the person around or across the circle. It is important to be aware of and prevent hard shoving. Rotate the center person fairly quickly, because it can get boring to the group. If anyone hits the ground it tends to cause others not to participate. Find a location where a fall probably would not cause an injury. Please be aware that experience has shown that after a few children have successfully been passed around the circle, some of the children begin to lose interest. When this happens they often decide to make it more fun by shoving and other inappropriate actions.

### ***Levitation***

The group begins by forming two equal lines facing each other and kneeling. A volunteer lays at the feet of the group, between the lines. The group collectively lifts the volunteer gently and begins swaying or rocking the participants. The group then stands, while continuing to rock the volunteer, they lift higher and higher until they are at the greatest height possible then slowly return to the ground. This is a very pleasant experience. The effect is maximized if the group remains silent during the entire activity. The entire process should take ~30 seconds/person. Find a location where a fall probably would not cause an injury. Due to the physical exertion required to do this activity, we normally would only offer it to a few, light weight students, and then I would try to get volunteers from those that did not participate in the Willow in the wind activity described above. The appropriate area to do this activity is free from rocks and other hard objects with a soft litter layer.

### ***Confidence Course Site***

When utilizing this location please take care that all students off the ground are adequately spotted. This probably means at least four spotters /student. When facilitating this program it is good to allow the students to choose which two or three of the eleven elements they wish to try.

They can then choose those elements which are appropriate to their abilities. When everyone has had an opportunity to complete these 2-3 elements, only have them pick additional elements if time allows. Since we are asking the students to push their limits, it is extremely advisable to have a responsible adult spotting each student off the ground, in addition to student spotters. Safety is the primary concern at this and all activities. The location of this activity is down the trail toward the cargo net site then turn left. activity along the ASE road. Check wires, connections and landing area prior to allowing students on This activity often captivates the students to such an extent that they forget about their spotting obligations. Maintaining a suitable climate for student participation is the attending adults toughest job. Refer to the last page for a drawing of the Confidence Course.

### ***Wild Woosey***

Requires two participants working together. The goal is to progress as far as possible along two diverging cables. The pair should physically support each other on the cable. This support should be done by each person making a fist with the right hand and grabbing the other person's fist with their left hand. This prevents broken fingers. At least two spotters should be on

the outside of the wires with two more spotters placed in the middle. As the team moves down the wires, the spotters must also move with them. This activity utilizes the two adjacent tight wires at the Confidence Course that form an acute angle.

### ***Cargo Net***

This activity can be used as a "testing" activity to determine whether your group is ready, in regards to safety, for the confidence course (toxic waste). This is an elevated activity, yet the risk is only during the entering and exiting the net. Follow instructions as indicated on the Cargo Net sheet. Check wires, connections and landing area prior to allowing students on the event. This element is located on the right side of ASE road near Reverse log. The dismount is critical and requires a "palms up grip". Please do not use the Cargo Net if you have not been officially trained to use the element.

### ***Beam***

This activity may also be used as a "test" activity for your group. Does the group need to be "tested" on both Cargo Net and Beam? Use your judgment. During this elevated activity every person off the ground is at risk of falling, therefore attentive spotting is essential. Follow instructions as indicated on the Beam sheet. Check wires and connections prior to allowing students on the event. This activity is located on the left side of the ASE road. Please do not use the Beam if you have not been officially trained to use the element.

### **Summation**

Following the activities and before the class is dismissed, a summary of the lessons learned should be led by the facilitator. A commonly asked question may be, Why does SOC have a confidence course? SOC is an environmental education center. What does a confidence course have to do with environmental education? Hopefully the idea that a determined person, working alone can make significant contributions to society, and/or to the environment.

Everyday people make decisions that impact on the environment in small ways, such as turning off lights, and water spigots when they are not being used. These may seem like small items, however if you multiply the savings by the number of days in a lifetime, the impact is significant. Also many others are making the same sorts of environmental decisions. We need to have confidence that our environmental problems are surmountable. We need to have confidence that our neighbors are also working to improve our environment. We also need to have confidence that each one of us can teach others and help them understand that our actions make a difference. Without a summation, very few students will understand the environmental connection to the confidence course. It will be demoted to merely a fun time, rather than an educational experience that was also enjoyable.

### **NJ Student Learning Standards:**

#### **COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION**

- 2.1.8.PGD.4: Analyze the relationship between healthy behaviors and personal health.
- 2.1.8.SSH.3: Demonstrate communication skills that will support healthy relationships.
- 2.2.8.MSC.7: Effectively manage emotions during physical activity (e.g., anger, frustration, excitement) in a safe manner to self and others.

- 2.2.8.PF.2: Recognize and involve others of all ability levels into a physical activity.
- 2.3.8.PS.1: Assess the degree of risk in a variety of situations, and identify strategies needed to reduce deliberate and non-deliberate injuries to self and others

### **LIFE LITERACIES AND KEY SKILLS**

- 9.4.5.CT.1: Identify and gather relevant data that will aid in the problem-solving process
- 9.4.5.CT.4: Apply critical thinking and problem-solving strategies to different types of problems such as personal, academic, community and global
- 9.4.8.GCA.2: Demonstrate openness to diverse ideas and perspectives through active discussions to achieve a group goal.

### **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

All of our field lessons integrate the concepts of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills found in the New Jersey's Core Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies.