

Up and at 'em

Picking yourself up after a fall isn't easy – especially for refugee children. But a Swiss mountaineer has found a way to help them scale the heights: climbing up a lorry.

By *India Stoughton*
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“What is your team's name?” says Mohammad Hamoud, his deep voice cutting through the high-pitched chatter of 15 children. “Heroes,” says one. “Tigers,” shouts another. Then the children begin to clamber along the outside of an unusual structure: an artificial mountainside built on the back of a flatbed lorry.

Known as the Rolling Rock, the portable bouldering wall is made from angled aluminium girders, wooden panels, and is dotted with colourful plastic holds. The children – all aged between 10 and 13



– wrestle, giggle and play. They are just like children everywhere except that many are Syrian refugees who live in tented settlements. All are attending school for the first time in years after being found working in fields, shops and factories. The school – run by NGO Beyond Association – is offering them another chance at childhood. And so is rock climbing.

The Rolling Rock belongs to ClimbAid, a Swiss charity that uses bouldering as a tool to provide physical and psychosocial support for Syrian,

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Lebanese and Palestinian children in the Bekaa Valley, a fertile plain in eastern Lebanon. The project is led by Swiss climbing enthusiast Beat Baggenstos, who overcame countless obstacles to build the vehicle and bring it to Lebanon: he had to itemise all 9,079 parts – including screws, girders and crashpads – for customs.

Studies have shown that climbing can help to alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. “It keeps you fit and synchronises body and mind,” says Baggenstos. “One of our most important messages is ‘Don't give up.’ Work on it and you're going to achieve something. You're going to be successful at climbing this route. We hope that this will be transferred to everyday life.” Founded in 2016, ClimbAid began in Switzerland by grouping asylum seekers with climbers who volunteer as mentors, engaging more than 120 people across six cities. But Baggenstos wanted to take climbing where he felt it was most needed: to refugees in Lebanon.

Now in its third summer, ClimbAid operates on a shoestring budget and relies



on international volunteers who spend at least a month teaching climbing. Despite tensions between Syrian refugees and the Lebanese, ClimbAid strives to work with mixed groups. This summer it launched ClimbAid Academy, a programme that aims to prepare 18 young participants to train as instructors.

The lessons seem to be working. Having cheered each other on during a relay race, and practised climbing through hoops, the children settle in the shade for a recap of the session. “I learned new movements with balance,” says a girl. “We learned how to listen to each other, how to work together and how to choose a name for our team,” says a boy. A little girl puts up her hand. “What did you learn?” Hamoud asks. “I learned to be brave,” she says. — (M)