

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

The Inherent Responsibilities of Training Children and Teens

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Working with kids has significantly influenced my beliefs about my role as a CrossFit coach. Designing and implementing appropriate programming for children and teens has really honed my general training skills. Unlike with my adult clients, who are responsible for making informed choices, it is not a child's or teenager's job to monitor my input and direction. There are special

responsibilities inherent in working with younger populations. The kids I work with need guidance and boundaries, and they rely on me to help them make gains safely and wisely.

Connor and David were my first CrossFit Kids experiments. My son Connor started doing CrossFit

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workouts with me in November of 2003 when he was 12 years old. It was just something fun and challenging we did together—kind of a natural progression from our common training in Kenpo Karate. Connor immediately went at it like a bulldog, which became our CrossFit mascot at my gym, BrandX, and he regularly humbled me during the workouts.

I posted regarding this on the CrossFit website in November of 2003: “Finished today’s workout at 14:50. My 12-year-old son finished about 30 seconds faster. Just a little humiliating having your son stand behind you saying, ‘Come on, Dad, you can do it.’”

That would become a way of life for me. Shortly after Connor started crushing me in workouts, his best friend David (13 years old) began to join us. That gave me two teenagers to chase, and it was then that things really began to get interesting.

David and Connor both possessed a natural competitiveness that made them embodiments of Coach Glassman’s statement that “Men will die for points.” Only these weren’t men. They were boys. No deep voices, no surging testosterone, no adult muscle mass. Just kids with a desire to work and excel. I rubbed my hands together and chuckled. This was going to be fun.

I began to put the boys through CrossFit workouts together in the early months of 2004. At first, I would just pick a workout, one that would surely bring them to their knees, and start the clock: “3-2-1-Go!” They would shoot out the door like bats out of hell and throw the (relatively light) weights up like surly dock workers trying to get to happy hour. No form, no technique, just raw determination and a desire to win. It was fun to watch and not particularly alarming because they weren’t putting up much weight.

Soon, the boys began to grow faster and stronger, and I had to up the ante to ensure they were challenged. This meant adding weight. These boys had watched their high school counterparts train in a gym where bench pressing enormous numbers was the ultimate in athleticism and status. They were no longer satisfied unless they saw plates and more plates on the ends of their barbells. So we loaded up.

Several months passed and, as the weights got heavier, I began to realize that Connor and David were having serious form issues. It became clear to me that, in their zeal to put up big numbers like their peers and my willingness to allow it, the boys would soon be in danger if we continued down this road.

Feeling the gravity of my responsibilities as a father and trainer, I immediately made them put the weights down. Not just the heavy weight, *all* the weight. Talk about devastated! Try putting mere PVC pipe in the hands of two hard chargers like Connor and David and watch the looks of disgust and disappointment that result. It was not an easy pill for them to swallow. Thankfully, the boys trusted me enough to comply with the new standards and protocol for their training.



In an important lesson for me as a kids’ trainer, we had to spend a full year fixing acquired bad habits and retraining the correct way. We meticulously hammered down technique, perfecting every aspect of their lifts. It wasn’t until they demonstrated perfect form, and I do mean perfect form, that I allowed them to load anything substantial on the bar. Rather than focusing on numbers, we focused on movement. Recognizing that nothing but technical work can quickly become mundane, especially for these kids who were accustomed to greater stimulus, we worked diligently to keep it fun. As a result, we developed a novel way of approaching the training.

The reset of our focus on proper movement over weight extended to both strength days and the metabolic workouts where weights were involved. When a “strength” day came up on CrossFit.com, we treated it as a skill day. We broke down the basics of the movements and de-emphasized numbers. “Fran” became “PVC Fran.” “Diane” became “Kettlebell Diane.” PVC and 10- and 15-pound bars were our friends. By changing implements, we allowed the boys to focus on form.

Working on strength movements, we dissected them into their simplest form and then linked them back together. First we defined and practiced a starting point for the movement. For example, “How do we stand for the shoulder press, and what is the proper rack position?” We repeated this until they committed it to memory. Then we identified a point to which we wanted to travel. “Where should the bar end up?” Once again, repetition ingrained this position. Finally, we determined how to get from point A to point B. “What is the proper bar path for the shoulder press?”

One important aspect of this training was rooted in the boys’ abilities to comprehend cues. After years of working with kids in the martial arts, I know it is sometimes necessary to modify instructions and cues to fit their vocabularies and their understanding of their bodies. For example, “active shoulders” is a term that can draw blank stares—and sometimes comical responses—from some kids. However, a simple phrase like “push up the sky” or “reach for the sky” (a *Toy Story* movie reference) can quickly elicit the desired response. Imagine what pushing up the sky looks like: it requires active shoulders. Tell a child to put his feet under his hips and you will likely get, “What are my hips?” But tell him to jump up and down, and you will find that his landing position poises his feet perfectly for a shoulder press.

As time passed, we began to amass a library of kid-friendly cues that made the movements readily understandable. Using these new cues, we worked the movements completely unloaded, even without PVC or bars. Like “air guitar” for exercise, we mimed where we wanted the movement to start, where we wanted to get to, and how we would get from one position to another. Only when the boys demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of each and every aspect of the movements did we place implements in their hands. This tactic was applied to

strength days and other WODs alike. No one moved to the next level until technical proficiency was achieved.

We also found it necessary to redefine the role of the stopwatch. For these boys, the clock was a great motivator, but it proved to be a harmful entity on the workout floor. The temptation to sacrifice good form in order to finish faster often prompted inefficient and even unsafe behavior. So we took the timer out until the boys could demonstrate that they could and would do the movements correctly in a timed workout. The reward for correct movement was simple: next time, they got to use the clock. In this way the boys began linking a focus on correct movement with what they found fun, the competition of the race. This also drove home the point that their trainer was more concerned about the movement than their times. This paid huge dividends when the boys began lifting heavy weights.



	Connor March 2007 age 15 130 pounds	Connor March 2008 age 16 145 pounds	David February 2007 age 16 135 pounds	David February 2008 age 17 145 pounds
Back squat				
Max sets	165 x 5	295 x 3	175 x 5	245 x 3
One-rep max	190	305	200	270
Power clean				
Max sets	115 x 5	175 x 3	75 x 5	175 x 5
One-rep max	130	205	95	185
Deadlift				
Max sets	190 x 5	305 x 3	200 x 5	310 x 3
One-rep max	210	315	225	365
Press				
Max sets	85 x 5	135 x 3	85 x 5	135 x 5
One-rep max	95	150	105	160
Overhead squat				
Max sets	No data	150 x 15	No data	155 x 10
One-rep max	No data	180	No data	175
Front squat				
Max sets	No data	225 x 3	No data	215 x 5
One-rep max	No data	260	No data	265

Still, the timer was never completely gone. “Angie,” “Cindy,” “Chelsea,” and “Barbara” were staples of our program. They allowed us to keep the boys’ metabolic conditioning fairly high. It was during this time that both boys got 39 rounds of “Cindy” in 20 minutes and “plus-5” scores on “Chelsea.” Yes, there were some ROM issues, but it was our way of keeping the intensity and fun (and scores) in the workouts while the hard work was being done to correct lifting form.

Flexibility and structural issues were addressed slowly. Individual structural hurdles were dealt with in a detailed and methodical manner. The training approach for working with each was as individual as the boy. Growth spurts created unexpected obstacles as perfect form turned into a nightmare when bones lengthened and muscle flexibility didn’t keep up. A once-sound movement became dangerous simply because the fundamentals were no longer possible. We found unique ways to address these issues, while still maintaining

the integrity of the training protocol. We modified movements as necessary to accommodate inflexibility, and the kids learned to be patient as their bodies slowly adapted to the inevitable changes of adolescence.

A year later we reassessed Connor’s and David’s positions and determined that it was indeed a year well spent. The changes we had made to the training protocol paid huge dividends. Focusing on movement was key to achieving the boys’ original goals. When we fixed the form, the numbers followed. Since our retraining phase, both of these young men—now 16 and 17 years old—have made amazing progress. As they continue to train, form remains paramount. If the movement breaks down at any point, the weight goes back in the rack. Focusing on technique rather than ego (theirs or mine) has allowed David and Connor to become stellar athletes whose lifting numbers continue to climb and WOD times continue to fall, while the ROM issues that were once present have disappeared.

In the chart on the previous page are comparisons of each boy's stats from early 2007 and from approximately the same time this year. Their progress in one year is amazing.

And here are some of the incredible benchmark times the boys have recently achieved:

Connor

Angie: 13:09

Fran: 3:22

Jackie: 6:30

30 muscle-ups: 3:45

David

Angie: 14:11

Barbara: 23:47

Helen: 7:42

Karen: 5:32

I look back on the early months of Connor's and David's training and am glad I decided to start them back at square one. It is obvious that working with less weight over a long period of time, a luxury we have with kids, has paid off. Whether on strength days or in other WODs, the emphasis on movement over numbers and times has helped them become stronger athletes who are moving safely and are technically sound. My experiment with Connor and David is an ongoing project that has produced results beyond what I ever imagined. I am proud of their hard work and successes, and I'm grateful for the lessons I've learned in training them. I am happy to say that we have never had an injury lifting weights in our box.

Training kids and teens comes with a profound responsibility. It is not simply a scaled-down version of training adults. There are multiple issues that require careful consideration. These kids are given into our care, whether they are our own children or trainees at the box. It is a role we take very seriously. These days, every child or teen (and every adult for that matter) who comes into my box starts out the same way: the right way. Form before weight and times, movement before ego. I believe this foundation in the basics and this focus on form will bring them both greater gains over the long term and a longer term in which to make healthy and productive progress.

Jeff Martin is a CrossFit Coach. He and his wife Mikki publish the monthly [CrossFit Kids Magazine](#), maintain the [CrossFit Kids website](#), and teach the CrossFit Kids [Certifications](#). They also own and operate CrossFit Ramona/BrandX Martial Arts.



Cyndi Rodi has a research-based background that includes working as an assistant with the UCLA-Camarillo Neuropsychiatric Research Program for schizophrenia research and as a behavioral therapist designing and implementing behavioral change programs for children with disabilities. She has a B.A. in psychology and has experience teaching public and private elementary school classes. She is a CrossFit Level 2 trainer and a CrossFit-certified barbell, Olympic weightlifting, and gymnastics trainer, as well as an integral part of CrossFit Kids.