
THE CrossFit JOURNAL KIDS

Cues Vs. Cute

Kids cues should be fun, but they need to be precise and effective. Mikki Lee Martin explains.

By Mikki Lee Martin

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Michael Brian

"Awesome, awesome, awesome! You rock!"

In the CrossFit Kids program at CrossFit Brand X, we hear a lot of cheerleading for our kids. Just this month, 7-year-old Hannah got double-unders and 14-year-old Nick performed a freestanding handstand after losing 50 lb. The kids work incredibly hard and have earned our support. But that kind of encouragement has to be balanced with actual coaching; ultimately, we are trainers and we should spend the vast majority of our time training kids to move well.

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Anyone who has attended the CrossFit Kids Trainer Course knows that we suggest the use of the “criticism sandwich”: something positive, something to work on, and something positive. After all, one of the major goals of the program is to pair fitness and fun, so the atmosphere must stay upbeat.

As in everything we do and say, there always exists the possibility of over-interpretation or of the takeaway being slightly different from what we intended. As with the classic “telephone game,” slight modifications to our words can change our meaning after several people have filtered the original statement through their personal lenses. Although some of the most creative ideas are born in this way, less-than-optimal interpretations can also result.



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***Want full hip extension on top of the box?
Try “Stand like a superhero.”***

The meat of the criticism sandwich is the movement cue. It is no secret that the success of a CrossFit trainer lies in the ability to effectively communicate optimal movement to clients. This is particularly true when training kids. How we cue children matters every bit as much as the use of positive language. Kids cues must convey exactly what we want to see from the child and be conceptually accessible to a variety of children. Cues must also contain something children can easily remember and want to imitate.

We found that with the expansion of Brand X’s CrossFit Kids program to include preschool and preteen classes, the need for more age-specific cues has also increased. So we are constantly using and testing new cues. Proportionally, few of these cues make the final cut. Often, a cue sounds great to us until we see how various children respond to it. Sometimes we find two cues that work and so offer both, allowing the kids to choose the cue they relate to and understand best.

Everyone has heard cute stories of how young children interpret things in a very literal sense. If you want them to use their imagination, you generally have to tell them to do just that by prefacing a cue with “imagine.” When it comes to instruction, kids will do exactly what you say. If a child has a wide base in the squat and you say, “Move your feet closer together,” do not be surprised if those feet end up being right smack next to each other simply because you said the words “feet” and “together” in the same sentence.

Here are a few cueing points of performance:

- The power of your demonstration should never be underestimated. Kids will copy your movement, energy and enthusiasm to the best of their ability.
- Kids should focus on one cue at a time.
- Caution must be used in checking cues for possible inappropriate double meanings.
- A good cue causes several good things to happen simultaneously.
- A good cue allows a new client to begin moving safely with the class inside of five minutes.
- A good cue conveys the essence of a concept in the simplest terms.
- The best coaching is mostly cueing with a dash of well-placed cheerleading.



In order from left: angry gorilla (deadlift), hold up the sky (press), stand like a superhero (squat or box jump).

The following is a list of a few of the kids cues with which we have found consistent understanding and successful movement:

- **Angry gorilla**—Setup position for the deadlift.
- **Fly a rocket or a butterfly with your hands**—Straight arms up at eye level or above and together to maintain a good lumbar position while moving through the squat.
- **Hold the sky up**—Overhead position for the press.
- **I don't know**—Shoulders-to-ears shrug in triple extension of the clean.
- **Press the sky up, it is very heavy**—Bar path for the press.
- **Monkey hangs and swings**—Bar play and grip strength.
- **Squish a bug, trap a bug**—For anything requiring heels down or stomps.
- **Stand like a superhero**—For open hips at the top of the squat or top of a box jump.
- **Stink bug**—Handstand push-up progressions from box.

You might think that the more clever and creative a cue, the more effective it is, but really, the key is simplicity that ignites recognition and fosters retention within the age group you are working with.

At CrossFit Kids headquarters, vetting new cues is a process: a few kids are taken out of class during the 5- to 10-minute focus work period by a senior trainer who runs them through the new cue and looks for comprehension and consequent movement. This is done with five to eight kids at a time in all of the appropriate age groups. It is repeated for each group to check retention, and usually the new cue is seen by over 100 kids before a decision is made to add it into our programming. Once the cue is added, the staff reviews it as a group after another four- to six-week focus cycle. Bear in mind that good cues should work with the vast majority of your clients. Bad cues are usually quite obvious right away and hardly ever make it to the focus work stage.

The following cues failed to hold up under scrutiny:

- **Elephant's trunk**—To maintain good back position in the squat (kids and preschoolers interpreted the trunk as a bendy water hose).
- **Feel the steel**—A general cue for deadlifting (really inappropriate for teens).
- **Flat back**—For correct lumbar curve while deadlifting (an adult cue that kids from 5 to 10 do not get at all).
- **Show your armpits**—For a strong barbell position in the overhead squat (another adult cue that had kids showing their armpits but while turning to check out their neighbors).

We asked some CrossFit Kids who have been CrossFitting for at least three years which cues were most memorable, and it came as no surprise that the stickiest cues for most of the kids were ones they found fun. This is in keeping with our goal to pair fitness and fun.

Finally, CrossFit Kids trainers should pay careful attention to their repertoire of cues. What may have worked so well for a group of kids may not work as well as that cohort matriculates up and new kids enter class. Always be on the lookout for new cues, whether discovered in the heat of the moment during class or picked up from other CrossFit Kids programs. That said, as excited as you might be to unveil a cue that is new and colorful and seemingly fun, take the time to test it among small groups of kids to ensure that it is indeed as effective as it first appears.

Our mission here is to optimize our time with these kids so we can succeed at making them better movers. Our chief aim? Pairing fun with fitness. But rather than cheerleading to give the appearance of fun, let's make sure our coaching is effective and enjoyable for the kids. One way we can do this is by being sure the criticism sandwich not only goes down well but also provides fuel for good movement.



Michael Brian

The best kids cues get instant results and are also the ones kids find fun. Be creative!

About the Author

Mikki Lee Martin is Director of Youth Programs for CrossFit Headquarters and, along with her husband Jeff, runs CrossFit Brand X in Ramona, Calif. In addition to numerous CrossFit qualifications, she is an ISSA-certified Youth Fitness Trainer, a first-degree kenpo karate black belt, and a KMNTC-certified krav maga instructor. With the opening of Brand X Martial Arts in 1999, Mikki began training teens and children in krav maga and kenpo karate. She has been integral in the practical development of the CrossFit Kids methodology in terms of programming, class structure and course curriculum. She and Jeff developed and maintain the CrossFitKids.com website, and she designed and published CrossFit Kids magazine from December 2005 to December 2010, when it was incorporated into the CrossFit Journal.