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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL KIDS

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## Where Are Your Knees?

Jeff Martin explains how and when to cue kids who are squatting in your box.

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By Jeff Martin CrossFit Kids

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All photos: CrossFit Kids

“Knees out! Knees out!”

If the workout has squats in it and you are in a CrossFit box, you will hear this cue—or you should hear it—being yelled out throughout the WOD. When we teach the mechanics of the squat, we discuss that the knees must be in line with the feet. This is the most efficient and safest way for us to squat.

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**Use creative ways to get athletes to keep their knees in line with their feet.**

Most of our kids begin squatting by letting their knees fall in. With teenagers, this can be due to inflexibility, weakness or just a lack of kinesthetic awareness. Whatever the reason, we cannot allow it to continue; it is neither efficient nor safe in the long run. But with a little focus work, these teens will have beautiful squats.

Before discussing the fixes, though, let's discuss how and when to cue knees out. When we are dealing with adults, we can often cue while they move. Cuing teens, especially teens just starting out, often involves stopping the movement and discussing with them what we want and expect. We are dealing with kids, and we always want to remain positive.

Recently, I watched a trainer working with a teenager getting ready to back squat at a powerlifting competition. Her trainer kept saying, "Don't let your knees come in." Next squat: "Don't let your knees come in." The trainer was missing the boat entirely. For maximum compliance, the discussion must be framed in a positive manner:

"I need you to keep your knees out."

Once you have positively framed your wants and expectations, make sure your teens fully grasp what you want them to do. Ask them if they understand what you want, have them repeat it back to you, and then request that they show you. This involves them in the teaching process.

So when do you cue knees out? Going back to the example above, the young lady's trainer would yell "Don't let your knees come in" as she was pushing out of the hole. Too late!

Cuing the knees out at the bottom of the squat (when they are already tracking in) is akin to yelling "Set your back!" in the middle of a deadlift. The cue is for the beginning of the squat. The hips push back and the knees push out at the beginning of the squat. This sets up the hips and legs to lift a load.

### How to Fix a Squat

We now know how to cue this, and when to do it, so let's go over some fixes.

Kinesthetic awareness—teens don't have it. Have you ever watched a 14-year-old boy walk through a door? One time his shoulder smacks the door frame, and the next time it's an elbow. Teens simply don't know where they are in space. So how can we expect them to understand where they need to put their knees when they squat?

For this kind of problem, we want to help the kid find his knees. Our standard CrossFit Kids fix has been to use two pieces of PVC placed on the outside of each pinky toe. The kid begins the squat and, as he descends, tries to push his knees out to touch the PVC.

Alison Patenaude, a middle-school teacher and the CrossFit Kids Schools Coordinator, uses Jump Stretch bands to fix squats. The kid stands on the band with his feet in the squat position, then loops the other end over his head. As he squats, he pushes his knees out to touch the bands. Patenaude's method allows teens to address this technical issue with less intense trainer oversight.

Remember: this fix is for kids who need to find their knees. They are strong and flexible enough to squat correctly, and once you show them where their knees are and where they need to be, these kids will be able to correctly align their knees throughout the squat.

Inflexibility can be fixed quickly with a little hamstring/adductor mobility work. Enter the supple leopard, Dr. K-Starr, and his wonderful [MobilityWOD](#) project. With a little work, you can assess what is going wrong with the squat and what needs to be worked on. Google “MobilityWOD adductor,” and you have a whole page of really top-notch instruction on how to fix adductor problems. The key now is to get the kids to work on their flexibility.

At CrossFit Kids HQ, our Teen class ends with trainer-led stretching. It’s a group thing. Kids sit together working on flexibility. Most of the kids go through standard work while a few with specific problems work on their issues. The key here is that they are gathered with their mates and a trainer is leading the mobility work or moving around the class helping the kids. We get better compliance if all the kids are doing it, and we need to be involved. Sending a group of teenagers off to mobilize on their own is asking for trouble. They won’t do it, and they will find something else to do. That something will probably be destructive to either themselves or your property. Besides, this is called “training”; it’s what we do, and while this might not be the most exciting part of the class, for many it is the most important.

Finally, we come to the young people who are just not strong enough to squat correctly. They cannot keep their knees out. These kids are often overweight or extremely deconditioned. Yet a disturbing growing trend is the number of young athletes—kids participating year-round in a sport—who are simply not exposed to functional movements. These kids are stars on the soccer field, baseball diamond or basketball court but cannot squat without shooting their knees forward and compromising their back position.

It is one thing to be standing with a parent of a child who is 100 lb. overweight and explaining the problems that child is facing and how we are going to help. It is quite another to stand with a parent who is beaming with pride and talking about what a wonderful athlete his child is while you explain that the child has trouble with basic human movement.

We have found box squatting to a fairly high box to be beneficial. The box squat requires that children push their hips back and keep their knees pushed out throughout the movement. The box should be high enough that the



***For athletes who lack the strength to squat properly, box squats are a great way to scale the movement.***

child meets success with every squat, with success being defined by the points of performance you ask them to meet. As the workout progresses, we are often able to lower the box substantially, but only to the point that the child is able to maintain correct movement. Keep in mind that you will probably have to go through this process for quite a while. If a child is squatting to a 20-inch box at the end of a workout, the next time he squats you will have to start higher than that and work back down. That is just the way it is.

Don't get frustrated and don't let the little things slip. A constant and diligent focus on mechanics will reap great rewards for both your kids and your program.

