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## The Kids Are All Right

Hilary Achauer travels to the home of CrossFit Kids to learn more about the future of fitness.

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By Hilary Achauer

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All images: Danell Marks/CrossFit Kids

Jeff Martin needed a solution, and like most people looking for answers, he turned to the Internet.

It was 2003, and Jeff—a krav maga brown belt and fifth-degree black belt—was running a boxing, kickboxing and martial-arts gym. Two guys who had just started training with Jeff approached him and said they really wanted him to set up a kickboxing match for them. The problem was they didn't have much ring experience. Jeff knew that improving their technique would take months—maybe even years—of practice. The only way they might have a shot at doing well was if they could figure out a way to quickly improve their fitness.

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At the same time, Jeff was reaching his mid-40s and finding it harder and harder to maintain his fitness level.

"I hadn't made any significant progress in years, and I couldn't believe or accept that that was the way it had to be," said Jeff.

So he sat down in front of the computer and started researching. One of the search terms he remembers entering is "crazy body-weight workouts." Eventually he stumbled across CrossFit.com. This was 2003, when most people's concept of "functional fitness" involved biceps curls on a Swiss ball. The short and brutal CrossFit workouts, with their combination of gymnastics, weight-lifting and "cardio" movements, seemed strange to Jeff, but he thought he'd give it a try.

To experience what he'd be asking his fighters to do, Jeff tested one of the workouts first. He figured it wouldn't be too difficult because he was an experienced martial artist and gym owner.



***CrossFit Kids demonstrations were a hit at the 2011 Arnold Sports Festival.***

He was wrong.

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The two fighters watched Jeff do CrossFit and were so alarmed by his post-workout appearance—lying on the floor, gasping for air—that they refused to try it. But Jeff was hooked.

"The other trainers said (CrossFit) wasn't good," said Jeff. They didn't want to try these new exercises, but Jeff had a plan.

"I could at least make the kids do it," he said with a laugh.

Jeff started taking his young teenage students through CrossFit workouts and began CrossFit training for his 12-year-old son, Connor, as well as Connor's best friend, 13-year-old David Shanahan (now the owner of CrossFit Maxim in Scotts Valley, Calif.). He said he saw a change in their athleticism within weeks.

Pretty soon, Jeff was integrating CrossFit into his martial-arts classes, having the kids kick the heavy bags and then run over and do kettlebell swings and burpees.

Jeff got his Level 1 certificate in 2004, and his wife, Mikki, got hers shortly after. Then in November 2004, Jeff and Mikki were in Colorado attending another certificate course. They went to breakfast with Greg and Lauren Glassman, and Jeff began telling Greg all about his work using CrossFit with the kids in his martial-arts gym.

Greg looked at him and said, "You should start CrossFit Kids."

### Children Take the Lead

Eight years later, CrossFit Kids is a rapidly growing element of the CrossFit program. More than 200 elementary and high-school teachers have come through the CrossFit Kids course, and Jeff and Mikki have been contacted by over 1,000 teachers who are using CF Kids via the website (CrossFitKids.com) or using the lesson plans they provide. CrossFit Kids has also been adopted by about 400 CrossFit affiliates.

As a mom of a 3-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl, I have more than a passing interest in CrossFit Kids. My kids occasionally accompany me to the gym, swinging on the rings while I sweat through a WOD, and my 6-year-old just started CrossFit Kids at my affiliate, CrossFit Pacific Beach.

To find out more about CrossFit Kids and the Martins, I drove 36 miles northeast of San Diego to CrossFit Brand X in Ramona, Calif., Jeff and Mikki Lee Martin's martial-arts and CrossFit facility, and the home of CrossFit Kids. I bumped down a dirt road until I found the 4,600-square-foot warehouse.

Jeff sat down with me in an office space outfitted with a beanbag and desks, which I later found out functions as a study hall during the school year, complete with twice-a-week tutors.

Jeff is soft-spoken but fiercely passionate about the benefits of CrossFit for children.

"We get as many emails asking about CrossFit Kids from affiliates as teachers," he said. "Most of the teachers don't do CrossFit. They find us by searching the Internet, looking for a better way to get their kids moving and fit. The standard fitness program offered by many schools just isn't working."

It's a common story—CrossFit appears when a person needs it most and changes his or her life. As I talked to Jeff, he looked out the window at a young man walking by and said, "You've got to talk to Cole. He came in here four years ago. He was 11 years old and was 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighed 235 lb. Now, at age 15, he's 6 foot 3 and weighs 190 lb. He can deadlift 455 lb., squat 330 lb., and has a 4-minute Fran time."

Jeff opened the door and brought Cole in the room. It was hard to believe this tall, lean boy was once so out of shape he had trouble getting up out of a chair.



***Still a teen, Cole can put up numbers that are the envy of most adults.***

Cole sat down and started telling me his story. He wasn't encouraged to try CrossFit by his mom, his dad or another adult. Unlike most of the kids who end up at Brand X, Cole came on his own.

"I was trying to get fit," he said, "so I could get faster on the racetrack."

Cole races International Motor Contest Association dirt-track modifieds, a precursor to NASCAR. He started off with go-carts and moved up the ranks until he began racing professionally against adults.

Jeff, who had been listening to Cole talk, spoke up.

"Ask him if he has his driver's license," Jeff said.

Cole and Jeff looked at each other and grinned. Cole said, "No, I don't."

"He doesn't have his driver's license. And he races against adults," Jeff said with bemused pride.

I asked Cole how CrossFit helped his racing, and he said, "I got a lot better at everything. Sometimes I'm strapped in the car for up to three hours, and my CrossFit training helps me stay alert. My mental and physical coordination has improved, which is important when you're driving 140 miles per hour."

Cole said he lost weight by following a Paleo diet. His friends are used to him carrying a big cooler every day at school filled with his Paleo-friendly food. Cole made such a strong case for CrossFit that his mom and aunt starting coming in, and they each lost 100 lb. Now his younger brother works out at Brand X, too.

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### At CrossFit Kids, the children often lead the adults.

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At CrossFit Kids, the children often lead the adults. Jeff tells stories of kids taking goldfish crackers out of the cupboard and throwing them away. He told me about children who won't let their parents shop in the middle of the grocery store. They ask their parents to stick to the outsides of the store and shop for fruit, vegetables and protein.

CrossFit Kids sparks more than physical changes in children. Time and again, Jeff said he's watched kids' grades improve and seen them become more focused and capable as they get better at CrossFit.

Jeff and Mikki both have extensive backgrounds in martial arts, which puts a strong emphasis on discipline and building positive character traits in children and young adults. There's never much discussion of building character and enforcing discipline in CrossFit Kids—everyone is too busy talking about improving form on the deadlift or learning how to do a kipping pull-up—but Jeff says these traits are natural products of the sport. Jeff says he sees results equal to or better than what he saw as a martial-arts trainer.



*Under close supervision, young athletes are held to high movement standards and must earn the right to use weight.*



### *What obesity epidemic?*

Mikki walked into the room when we were talking about discipline and said, "Almost every 12- or 13-year-old cheats at the WODs when they start out. They don't cheat by the time they're 14. And that's not because we say anything to them about it. They just learn about that sense of accomplishment and don't want to cheat anymore."

### **They've Got Time**

The CrossFit Teens class, for kids 13 and up, was starting, so Jeff and I walked next door to watch from the area they call "the Hurt Locker."

As the kids went through their warm-up, Jeff told me they use this time to assess the teens.

"They aren't always very communicative," he said. "They may have had a hard day or are tired from practicing a sport. We see how they are moving and scale accordingly."

Jeff and the other trainers never tell the teens or kids to hurry up. They focus on technique and pay attention to how the kids are feeling.

"They have years to get this right," said Jeff. "I want to make them move better, and eventually they'll move faster."

Next door to the CrossFit Teens class, a CrossFit Kids class was in full swing. Their teacher was Alison Patenaude, a petite but energetic woman who is also a middle-school P.E. teacher. The CrossFit Kids class is for children ages 5-12, and their workout includes common CrossFit movements like box jumps mixed in with more kid-friendly exercises like a 50-meter skip. The class moves quickly, with an emphasis on the joy of movement.

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*Fitness aside, CrossFit Kids is about having fun in every class.*

After the class, I asked Alison about what her middle-school students think about CrossFit.

"One day a week I designate a CrossFit day," she said, "and the kids love it. It evens out the playing field, because it's new to everybody. It's so scalable, and we can see gains and improvements quickly. The fitness scores have improved, and the other teachers tell me they overhear the kids talking about their WODs and comparing air-squat times."

Alison teaches in a low-income district, so her equipment is limited. She uses cardio steps instead of boxes, jump ropes and some old tires given to her by her step-father.

But CrossFit doesn't need fancy equipment to change lives. At the beginning of the 2010-11 school year, Alison had a 12-year-old girl in her class who was a little overweight and extremely introverted. The girl spent most of her time with her head down, bangs covering her face, hanging out in the back of the class.

"In the first quarter, I had my students write one or two fitness goals they wanted to achieve by the end of the school year," Alison said. "Hers were to 'stay vegetarian through 2011 and lose 10 lb.'"

Alison began CrossFit training for the girl in P.E. and provided her with nutrition education and one-on-one discussions about the beliefs and methodology of CrossFit.

"She ended the year 15 lb. lighter, a non-vegetarian!" Alison said with pride. "She took 3 minutes and 30 seconds off her mile time, she was the girl *everyone* wanted on their team, and she became one of my top athletes."

### **The Future of CrossFit**

The Reebok sponsorship and big-name star athletes make CrossFit exciting. The million-dollar purse at the Games lends the sport a high-visibility sparkle, ESPN2 broadcasts showcase the new sport of fitness, and it's encouraging to see professional athletes using CrossFit as part of their training.

But the heart of CrossFit is with people like Alison, who use it to change the lives of their students. It's with kids like Cole, a 15-year-old with big dreams and endless determination.

Alison told me the changes in her student were not only physical. After a few months of CrossFit as her P.E. class, the girl started wearing her hair back off her face. She made new friends and was volunteering to demo WODs in front of the class. The changes spread to other areas of her life. The girl's teachers saw an improvement in her grades and self-esteem as a result of her success in CrossFit.

CrossFit Kids is often called "the future of fitness." I always thought that meant future fitness stars—training kids to be little Rich Fronings or Annie Thorisdottirs.



***The future of fitness.***

What I realized after visiting Brand X and talking with Jeff, Mikki and Alison is that it's really about keeping our kids fit so they *have* a future. It's about giving them the discipline, strength and self-confidence they need to be successful and happy and strong adults.

That's the future of fitness.



*Courtesy of Hilary Achauer*

### About the Author

*About the Author: Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor with a background in marketing and communications. An amateur-boxer-turned-Cross-Fitter, Hilary specializes in health and wellness content, focusing on emerging fitness trends. Her writing has been featured in a leading online parenting magazine as well as a number of travel and lifestyle publications. She is an editor for Frommer's travel guides and writes websites, brochures, blogs and newsletters for universities, start-ups, entrepreneurs, accounting and financial service organizations, and management consultants. She lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and spends most of her free time at CrossFit PB. To contact her, visit [HilaryAchauer.com](http://HilaryAchauer.com).*