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## CrossFit Kids for the Developmentally Delayed

Josh MacDonald offers tips for working with special-needs children.

By Josh MacDonald

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All images courtesy of Josh MacDonald

Nobody works with kids for the money or fame. Each of us began teaching kids how to CrossFit with the hopes of improving the general health and fitness of as many of them as possible. We want to have full classes, and we want the kids to have a ton of fun in the process.

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***Each child is different and requires individual treatment within a large group class.***

Our programming is designed to teach proper movement skills and improve the general fitness level of all kids, but no two kids are alike. Each comes to his or her first class with different skills and abilities. Some are natural athletes, and others need help to understand some of the basic movements.

Every once in a while, you get a child who needs an extra level of care. Maybe he does not understand all of your cues and directions, and maybe he has poor body awareness and can't even begin to understand the mechanics of the movement. While it might seem that all our kids act like this at times, there are some who have a legitimate limitation called "developmental delay."

### **Identifying and Managing Challenges**

Developmental delay is a very broad term that includes a wide range of limitations. From a clinical perspective, a developmental delay is any disruption in the normal progress of learning and growth. Most children with a developmental delay experience onset at a young age, typically 18 months or younger. The causes can vary from autism to Down syndrome or more complicated medical issues. Unfortunately, there are little to no unifying characteristics for members of this group other than their need for additional special help and attention.

When they enter your gym and ask to join your class, however, you have to make some quick decisions on how best to handle the situation and adapt your class.

There are too many different types of developmental delay to cover all the variables and ways to address them. What I can do is offer some general guidelines and principles that should help you in guiding these kids as much as possible while also maintaining the effectiveness of the class for the rest of your kids. In each case, you will have to make some decisions. Some are easy (how to modify a push-up), and others are very difficult ("Do I have to say 'no' to this family?"), but all these decisions should be made from an educated and informed position.

### **Step 1: Know the child**

The first step in including the child is to identify his basic needs and try to fit those needs into your program. Most families will be very open with you about the issues of the child. If there is an obvious delay when you first meet the child, then feel free to ask questions of the family. As you gather information and suggestions from the parents, you will get a much better idea of the level of attention that the child will need.

Sometimes, however, you might not see any concerns until you are right in the middle of your warm-up. In that event, try to learn as much as you can by observing movement patterns and how the child responds to verbal cues and social dynamics.

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## **Does the child have the ability to feel and move all parts of her body?**

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Are there any physician-imposed limitations to exercise?

Whether it's through questioning the parents or observing the child in class, you need to look for some specific elements. The most important information you can learn about the child is his ability to follow directions and keep with the flow of the class. Start with the following questions:

### Social

Does the child notice/interact with the other kids?

Does the child get upset easily? If so, what sets her off?

Does the child understand age-appropriate social norms?

Will the child be able to attend to a variety of tasks, including both activity and instruction times?

### Language

Will the child understand basic directions to stay on task and understand game play?

Will the child understand more complex directions to adjust and modify movements?

Does the child speak? And is there any delay in the child's ability to communicate basic needs (i.e., pain, thirst and bathroom needs)?

### Physical

Does the child have the ability to feel and move all parts of her body?

Are there any physician-imposed limitations to exercise?

Does the child have the body awareness to copy movements after demonstration and instruction?

Does the child have the coordination to complete the fundamental movements?

### Step 2: Know your class

Once you have an understanding of the needs of the child, the next step is trying to fit that child into your existing class. Before this can happen, you need to have an excellent understanding of the dynamics inherent in your space, your group and your programming. Your existing space and programming are what make your class unique. The challenge lies in maintaining the essence of your class as well as including as many kids as possible.

For example, if the kids in your class are all pre-teens and are pushing to do main-site workouts with high levels of intensity, then you may need to rethink the wisdom of adding in a child with Down syndrome. When trying to include a child with disabilities, realize that the other children may not all be warm and welcoming. Most kids will be just fine, but some do not understand disabilities and will treat the new child as "different." Unfortunately, kids can be pretty mean, and we want to minimize the damage that can come from less tolerant kids.



### *Are your young athlete able to understand complex directions during class?*

You don't need to give a lecture on tolerance to your class. Instead, provide only as much explanation as is needed. You may not need to do anything more than introduce the new kid in class. Put a stop to anything inappropriate, but too much lecturing from you can be just as alienating for the child with disabilities. Let things develop on their own; you might be surprised how welcoming your group can be.

When considering your space and equipment, think about whether or not your facility is accessible to wheelchairs or other adaptive equipment. Do you have the right equipment? Do you need some lighter wall-balls or shorter boxes before the child can complete the workout?

The trainer-to-child ratio is also much more important when you consider adding in a child with a developmental delay. A child with attention deficit disorder (ADD) may require two or three times the supervision, directions and cues as your other kids. If you are a solo trainer and used to having only three to four kids, your class will become much more difficult with this new addition. We always have two trainers for our kids classes, and having a second person is always helpful, but even more so when you have a child with a developmental delay.

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Your programming will need to allow for significant scaling. While you don't want to limit the growth of your other clients, you also need to be realistic about the ability, or inability, of these special-needs kids to do safe overhead squats and box jumps. It can be difficult, but when considering each of these aspects of your class, remember to see the big picture: don't change the core spirit or unique personality of your class.

**Step 3: Know the Programming**

If you do decide to take on the challenge (and I highly recommend it), keep some principles in mind. First, preserve the integrity of the movements. CrossFit is founded on nine functional movements. These are natural and inherent in our daily lives. They are just as inherent in the lives of these children. Every kid needs to deadlift toys off the floor, clean a backpack to the shoulders and press the groceries overhead to put them on the counter. As you modify workouts and activities, try to keep the core movements intact.

For example, if the WOD is Cindy but your child cannot count well and can only manage two movements at a time, his workout is squats and modified push-ups. He does reps of one movement until you tell him to switch movements (roughly every 5-8 reps). This way he still generates intensity and performs functional movements with only minimal extra cues. You can attend to the rest of the class and occasionally direct him to switch while watching for mechanical faults.



*Classes at your affiliate should have a unique character that stays the same regardless of the participants.*

Maybe you are doing a version of Kelly with running, box jumps and wall-balls. If your child lacks the core stability for safe wall-ball and cannot safely jump onto a box, she can work on a shortened run, air squats and lateral hops over a taped line on the ground. The core movement elements are present even though it appears to be a different WOD. Over time, possibly very slowly, you will notice improvements: the squats will get more solid, the plank position will get stronger and the coordination will improve.

Another factor to keep in mind when integrating children with disabilities is the concept of grading intensity. Particularly early on, these kids will not understand the concept of intensity. In line with the CrossFit Kids methodology, I leave the child in charge of how intensely she approaches each workout. If your child wants to sit and rest for a minute mid-WOD or needs a drink of water, let it happen. If she wants to push hard, let it happen—with caution. The child will know how hard she can push.

If you are going to make a mistake in this area, it is much better to err on the side of too little intensity than too much. Over time the child will learn to push harder; you don't need to rush this one. Your cues should be centered on correcting mechanics, directing the sequence of exercises and positive encouragement. As with any child, you shouldn't tell these kids to push harder or not to stop. If they need to rest, it's OK. They will enjoy the class much more and be more likely to return if they hear positive encouragement and have fun.

### **Step 4: Know Your Limits**

After you gather information on the child's needs, compare that with your current class dynamics and consider modifying your programming and workouts, you might still be in over your head. Most people are not experienced in working with kids with developmental disabilities. It is normal to find this a bit overwhelming and intimidating. Some CrossFit Kids instructors are even new to working with kids, never mind special-needs kids.

If you cannot see a clear plan and good fit for this child in your class, you have some options. First, ask for help. This may come in the form of another trainer or assistant acting as an aid for just that one child. Maybe the parent is able to help to varying degrees. Parents are great at counting reps and rounds for the kids or keeping them on task. Parents

should not correct form or modify a workout, but they can be of great help in managing the behavioral needs of the child. Remember, they are the expert on their kids and they know best how to keep them motivated and on task.

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You can also look into local resources, including special-education teachers or occupational therapists at your local school, for suggestions on working with kids. The parents might even be willing to connect you with their child's own teacher for advice on working with this child.

All that being said, you still need to know that it is still OK to say "no" to a family. Maybe your group of kids is not a good fit for someone with a disability. Maybe the child's disability is too significant for this program. Maybe you just are not ready to work with this population yet. Regardless of the reason, if you have done due diligence in trying to make it work and you still do not think it is a good fit, you can tell the family that this is not the setting for them. The last thing you should do is take on something you feel is unsafe for the child or the rest of the group.

As a pediatric occupational therapist of 10 years I have worked with disabled children almost half of my life, and I have still had occasion to tell a family that the setting was not right for them. In one such case, the child was too physically unstable and unable to follow basic directions. It would have taken far too much attention to keep this child on task, and he was not ready for the foundational movements. He needed even more basic work to establish midline and hip stability before trying anything with intensity or significant numbers of reps. What I did do to help this family was connect them to some local special-needs sports classes.

If you need to tell a family “no,” try to direct them to some other sources. Ask if they are getting therapy. If not, occupational and physical therapy can help with this area. Also, many cities have special-needs programs for dance, gymnastics and martial arts. These can be great ways to get kids moving in small groups with professionals trained in working with special-needs children. Look into the options in your community ahead of time. It is always easier to decline a family if you have some alternative choices to present at the same time.

When trying to include a child with a developmental delay, there are countless variables to consider. Not only do you need to know as much information about the child as possible, but you also need to consider how this child can best fit into your current class structure. These kids can make amazing changes with the CrossFit methodology, but it can seem daunting when including them in your class. With some thorough information gathering and specific planning, you can be well prepared for the challenge. The rewards are immense when you see these kids do things their parents never thought possible.



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### About the Author

*Josh MacDonald received his master's degree in occupational therapy in 2001 and has 10 years of experience working with children with special needs in both outpatient and inpatient neuro-rehabilitation. He is the pediatric therapy manager at Arizona Orthopedic Physical Therapy—Kids Place in Goodyear, Ariz. Josh works out at CrossFit Fury, where he also runs the CrossFit Kids program. Josh has Level 1, CrossFit Kids and Olympic Lifting certificates.*

