
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

The Right Kind of Fit for Teen/Advanced Class

Dan Edelman explains how to keep children engaged well into adulthood with solid programming.

By Dan Edelman

December 2011



All images: Danell Marks

The front door slams behind her with a smug finality and a dull crash of the bells that are slung around the door handle. The noise is lost in the clamor rushing at the woman and her son like a tsunami. It's kids' racket, happy racket—the sound of kinetic energy.

After a brief chat with a trainer, a waiver is signed and two free trial weeks sprawl before them. Hands delicately on her son's shoulders, the woman steers him ahead of her. He might be coltish or he might be swathed in the last vestiges of baby chub; he might be hulking or move with an athletic carriage. However he moves, it's a bit tentatively, sometimes with his chin down and eyes warily scanning the scene.

The roll-up doors are open, revealing the rocky nubs of ancient mountains lining the horizon. If it's summer, the superheated air might be scented with the aroma of trash from the disposal service's transfer station down the street. Winter and the air nips with icy fangs, creeping under the skin. A swarm of preteens—some swinging from monkey bars and gymnastics rings—chatter seemingly all at once with big grins and heads on swivels so as not to miss a word. A more staid, cliquish group of older teens stands, sits or foam-rolls in a loose circle near the vault and talk smack about friends, teachers and each other. Beneath the din, music plays—new country or rock of varying vintage. Adding to the sense of chaos on the brink is an apparent lack of adult supervision.

The class is not just an expedient expansion of CrossFit Kids. It bridges the gap between CrossFit Kids and adult CrossFit.

But that doesn't last long. From behind the now slightly distressed mom and baleful-eyed boy strides Coach Jeff Martin. He senses the pair and stops to introduce himself. He shakes hands, speaks in low tones, listens carefully and welcomes the young man and his mother to observe the platforms. The boy isn't invited to lift. Not yet. He is, however, told he'll participate in the CrossFit Kids Teen/Advanced class that follows.



The CrossFit Kids Teen/Advanced athletes mix in some smack talk with their warm-up.

One kid, then another sees Martin and dutifully begins moving toward the PVC pipe in the corner of the gym. There is no let-up in their prattle. Not until a circle forms around Martin, and even then the roar merely dulls. By this time, two other trainers have appeared and begin to orbit around the kids without much fanfare but maybe a smart-alecky remark or two. One by one, the kids demonstrate their technique, get the nod, then head to the platforms. Here and there, a trainer lingers, offers some instruction, watches the kid again and then sends him or her off to join the others.

It's Tuesday—that means deadlifts. And the boy and his mom learn rather quickly that despite the air of levity, this is no nonsense. This is the weightlifting program for the CrossFit Kids Teen/Advanced class. It is serious business. The class is not just an expedient expansion of CrossFit Kids. It bridges the gap between CrossFit Kids and adult CrossFit. But it is not a simple span. CrossFit Kids Teen/Advanced is underpinned by a methodology deliberately designed for the preadolescent and adolescent age group, a methodology that is entirely CrossFit Kids, entirely CrossFit.



Form always comes first in a CrossFit Kids class.

BIG Fun

To understand the origins of the Teen/Advanced class is to understand the origins of CrossFit Kids.

In 2003, Martin, bored of the same old same old, began a personal quest for something different to do in the gym. He discovered CrossFit, a perfect match for him with his hard-charging attitude and scientifically inquisitive mind. His then-12-year-old son, Connor, joined him on this adventure, initially just to work out with dad. Soon after, Connor's 13-year-old friend David jumped in, too. At the same time, Martin introduced CrossFit into Brand X's kickboxing classes, which were attended mostly by teens and soon morphed into CrossFit with kickboxing. What began as a refreshing new way to work out quickly turned into a long-running experiment for Martin using principally Connor and David as firebreathing guinea pigs. It was an experiment an experiment that, through much trial and error, yielded the basic tenets of today's CrossFit Kids (12).

The core CrossFit Kids program is designed for children ages 5 to 12, and for the first few years this was the target group toward which Martin and his trainers—including Martin's wife, Mikki Lee, who is also Brand X co-owner—directed their energies. The program promotes the idea that children's fitness should be broad, inclusive and general—BIG fun—a concept derived from CrossFit founder Greg Glassman's fundamental aim for CrossFit.

Fun in a CrossFit Kids class is everywhere. It is not shy; it does not lurk. It's splashed on the whiteboard in bright rainbow writing and pictures, it tumbles from the stereo speakers in upbeat grooves, it giggles in the cues, it flows around the class in the encouraging form of the CrossFit Kids trainers, and it struts its stuff during the game, radiating from within the smiles of the children.

Fun in a CrossFit Kids class is everywhere.

BIG fun—that's the ultimate goal of a successful CrossFit Kids program. Keep it fun and the kids will keep coming back. They will learn how to move and why they want to move that way, and they will begin a lifelong relationship with super-wellness. That's a pretty simple prescription. With one caveat: Fun changes over time.

Yeah, the kids keep coming back—some of them for years—but something happens. They age. They mature—physically and psychosocially. And there comes a time when buy-ins like Tabata Tantrums and games like Musical Medicine Balls don't provide the same kick, and when running an obstacle course that requires as much leaping of dawdling 6-year-olds as it does 6-inch hurdles loses its challenge, when CrossFit Kids isn't as much fun for them.

As children transition into adolescence, among so many other changes, their sense of fun becomes more sophisticated and refined, more purposeful. Of relevance here, the competition component of CrossFit is viewed in a new light. It's now fun to compete and achieve, but the CrossFit Kids methodology deliberately mutes competition—what might be viewed as the pursuit of intensity—in favor of technical learning, which is not only essential but also appropriate in terms of how children's bodies respond to any kind of resistance training (4).

So what do you do with 11- or 12-year-olds who mature out of the Kids class? What about a newbie 15-year-old? The preadolescent and adolescent populations can represent a rather large and counterproductive gap between CrossFit Kids and adult CrossFit. Martin recognized this early on.

The Bridge: The Structure and Soul of the Program

Years of experience training children in the martial arts revealed to Martin significant attrition when kids left the junior class and joined the adult class.

**The somatic differences
between young adolescents
and adults are apparent,
but there are psychosocial
considerations as well.**

The problem was the kids class lost its appeal to the tweens and teens, but they were not yet ready for the adult class. The somatic differences between young adolescents and adults are apparent, but there are psychosocial considerations as well. We're pretty sure the notion of getting comfortable with uncomfortable has nothing to do with forcing teens to hang out with adults. They prefer the company of their own kind. So Martin understood that adolescents would stick with CrossFit if they had their own community. The issue was establishing that community and then growing it.

Some five years ago, with CrossFit Kids developing into a full-fledged, legitimate strength-and-conditioning program for children, Martin was running conditioning sessions for his son Keegan's 13-and-under soccer team. As with Connor and David, these adolescents enjoyed competition and defined fun as accomplishment, providing more grist for Martin's ever-running mill. The team sessions ended, but the germ of the kind of community Martin envisioned remained. From it sprouted the CrossFit Kids Teen class as a stand-alone entity specifically tailored for the adolescents. Initially, the class was limited to children ages 12 to 17. Over time, Martin found himself faced with some younger kids who moved well and charged too hard for Kids class. So

the Teen class became the Teen/Advanced class with the condition that athletic kids ages 10 and 11 could join the class only if they could take instruction and remain focused.

The Teen/Advanced class is structured differently from the core CrossFit Kids class. The Kids class runs no longer than 30 minutes, a time frame suited to the attention span of that age group. Given the athletes' higher capacity to remain focused, the Teen/Advanced class can run upward of 45 to 50 minutes, depending on the WOD. Further, the Teen/Advanced class jettisons the game in favor of a skill-based cash-out, mobility work and sometimes a short study hall.

The Teen/Advanced training methodology is essentially the CrossFit Kids methodology. New clients are matriculated immediately into the class but given extra attention on the fundamentals with little or no load, depending on the movements. The trainers use positive language and encouragement, vernacular is defined, and movements are demonstrated with the whole-brain approach to ensure engagement with visual, auditory and tactile/kinetic learners.



Teens need their own community within CrossFit to stay connected, challenged and motivated.

But some crucial distinctions set the Teen/Advanced approach apart from that of the Kids class. Cues are now teen-friendly and often elaborated on; i.e., more sophisticated, less fuzzy-wuzzy language can be used. Teen culture differs from that of younger children; trainers looking to relate to adolescents can't go wrong by gaining some knowledge of what's popular among their young clients; i.e., music, social media, activities. CrossFit Kids trainers always endeavor to be sensitive to children's emotional well-being. In the Teen/Advanced class, it is imperative to get to know the clients and be appropriately responsive to the various moods adolescents might bring with them after a rough day at school or home. Learn who can handle jokes and who might need to be handled more delicately. Respect boundaries. Always respect the kids—it's a dimension of their new sense of fun.

CrossFit Kids trainers always endeavor to be sensitive to children's emotional well-being.

In addition to being emotionally squirrely, preadolescents and adolescents can be somatically squirrely. Teen/Advanced trainers expect variable midline stability with this age group and are watching for deviation and/or degradation in a teen's movements consistent with growth phases. In the case of the former, verbal cues are given; for the latter, adjustment to an athlete's programming is in order, sometimes for that day, sometimes for weeks until the kid grows into his or her new body. It's another reason to know your teen clients and to document individual statuses and progress.

The practical basis for the Teen/Advanced methodology also was drawn from Martin's martial-arts experience. Martial-arts instruction centers on teaching complex movements. For kids, this requires analyzing and breaking down a movement into manageable, easy-to-grasp parts. Martin applies this approach to all CrossFit staples—from the air squat to the squat snatch. Additionally, a critical aspect of Martin's coaching success is the importance he attaches to empirical evidence. That is, he does not anchor himself to any one system or theoretical perspective if class observations do not support it. For example, Martin



CrossFit Teen/Advanced trainers frequently alter programming to take into account growth spurts, adjusting things until the teen becomes accustomed to his or her new body.

recommends short, sharp couplets and triplets, having found teens respond well to these while still excelling in longer domains despite not training there—a genuinely evidence-based program.

Evidence: The Cases of K, H and C

At age 13, K was a good candidate for the Teen/Advanced class. Although a retiring young man, he appeared reasonably athletic with a supportive CrossFitting father.

However, given logistics, K couldn't get to CrossFit Brand X for the class consistently. And while the kids were all welcoming when he did attend, he said he preferred training with his father. So, much of his CrossFit exposure occurred during the adult class when his father could get to the box. Yet, despite being with his dad, by all (trainer) accounts, K never quite gave his all to the WODs, regardless of their proper scaling. And he never quite got from his training what other kids who regularly attended Teen/Advanced class received: technical proficiency, heavier lifts and increasing work capacity. K's family has since moved away and the state of his training is unknown to CrossFit Brand X.

H was a high-school sophomore when she joined the CrossFit Brand X Teen/Advanced class. Generally an upbeat person, she was quick to smile, intent on taking instruction and really seemed to enjoy the class. She made the varsity tennis team the first year she tried out, so clearly she was an athlete. At the outset, her 1-rep-max back squat was 65 lb. and her deadlift was 95 lb. for 3 reps. After six months, her 1-rep-max back squat had reached 185 lb. and her 1-rep deadlift was 205 lb. Progress, for sure. But she dropped out of class during tennis season. She returned for only a couple weeks afterward and managed a 135-lb. back squat before fading away again.

Perhaps for H, the long training gap and consequent detraining discouraged her. Perhaps for H, the notion of “starting over” (ostensibly) in a class full of friends who have advanced well beyond where they were when she dropped out proved too daunting.

Martin recommends short, sharp couplets and triplets, having found teens respond well to these while still excelling in longer domains despite not training there.

C showed up at CrossFit Brand X at age 11. A painfully shy kid, he was tall for his age—about 5’6”—and weighed 235 lb. He moved un-athletically, was unable to squat without support and even had difficulty rising from a chair. On top of that, his nutritional intake resided outside the CrossFit Kids-recommended guidelines. He felt he was too big for the Kids class (perhaps the correct assessment), but was intimidated by the Teen class. Instead, he participated in the morning adult class. Although his training was scaled under the watchful eye of a qualified trainer, his unease was apparent and his effort half-hearted. In addition, as an up-and-coming race-car driver, he disappeared during racing season. His results were disappointing.

In Jan. 2010, C joined the Teen/Advanced class. He was 6’1” by then. Significantly, he asked about changing his diet at the outset. Now he is 6’3” and 196 lb., and rather

than dropping out, he continues with his CrossFit training during racing season. Among other accomplishments, he has a 1-rep-max deadlift of 455 lb., a sub-7-minute mile and a 4:33 RX’d Fran time. But more impressive than his numbers or his increasing athleticism is the manner in which he carries himself: with utmost confidence. He is a leader and a role model in the Teen/Advanced class. He is 15.

Teen/Advanced class offers children who have outgrown CrossFit Kids the opportunity to seamlessly continue their training until they are old enough to participate in adult CrossFit.

The Right Fit to Get Fit

One way to look at the Teen/Advanced class is it provides a bridge between CrossFit Kids and adult CrossFit. The importance of consistency in technique is understood, but equally as important to the CrossFit prescription is consistency in training.

The Teen/Advanced class offers children who have outgrown CrossFit Kids the opportunity to seamlessly continue their training until they are old enough to participate in adult CrossFit.

Another way to look at the Teen/Advanced class is in terms of presenting adolescents with an appropriate environment in which to train. For our purposes, we define environment as comprising classmates, trainers, programming and methodology, and the cases of C and K suggest environment is a key influence when it comes to reaping the benefits of CrossFit. We only can speculate on the kind of CrossFit progress K and H could have achieved had their attendance been consistent. And one wonders where C—who credits CrossFit for helping his burgeoning racing career—might reside on the wellness continuum had the Teen/Advanced class not been readily available to him.

The implications are multifold.

From the standpoint of client retention, how many 10-to-17-year-olds might be cast adrift for the simple reason that boxes are not accommodating their training needs? Kids have a lot of choices when it comes to activities, and parents will not necessarily continue to pay for something their children do not find enjoyable. The Teen/Advanced class is a welcoming place for preadolescents and adolescents who have outgrown the Kids class, helping boxes maintain and grow a core clientele.

Plus, the Teen/Advanced methodology accounts for adolescent growth phases, which are a vital consideration when it comes to skill retention. Without an appreciation for growth spurts, training of this age group can be at the very least inefficient and ineffective, and at most unsafe. Understanding the changes that come with adolescence means teen needs won't get lost in the shuffle.

The Teen/Advanced class offers training continuity in an appropriate environment for preadolescents and adolescents. In the CrossFit microcosm, this is crucial to increase work capacity across broad time and modal

domains over the course of life. And it will really hammer home the life lessons first taught in the Kids class; e.g., integrity, problem-solving and hard work. In more general terms, it is not too fantastic a leap to see how Teen/Advanced class can represent a link in a Gladwellian sort of opportunity chain (6).

Taking the long view, a CrossFit Kids program should be seen as the framework for systematically and organically developing Games athletes.

CrossFit Farm System

There is another implication.

The CrossFit community has seen the growth of challenges, throwdowns, invitationals and even its first league. Mostly for fun, these competitions indicate the beginning of a kind of top-down organization of CrossFit as a sport and sometimes are used as preparation for the Games. Additionally, given the astounding growth of the Games, a lot of affiliates have implemented some kind of year-round program designed to produce Games-level athletes.

Taking the long view, a CrossFit Kids program should be seen as the framework for systematically and organically developing Games athletes. And this should have been strikingly apparent to any spectators fortunate enough to witness the Teen Challenge at the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games or even the CrossFit Kids demonstrations running that weekend. The Teen Challenge was a brilliant display of the substance, style and spirit of CrossFit, and the heart of any legitimate CrossFit coach should have quickened at the possibilities the exhibition presented. From the perspective of long-term athletic development, it should've come as no surprise that CrossFit Brand X/ CrossFit Kids HQ—with the oldest and most mature CrossFit Kids program, with a team comprising some of the longest-training CrossFit Kids—took first place at the Teen Challenge. It is compelling to contemplate where the top five fittest men and women on Earth might be today if, all other things being equal, they had started their training in CrossFit Preschool.



Future CrossFit Games competitors?

Back at the Hurt Locker

Inside the Hurt Locker—CrossFit Brand X's expanded space next door—the new kid stands at the end of a wiggling line of chattering kids waiting, perhaps a bit anxiously, his turn. He has no idea what to do but was told to follow the others. He does a fair approximation of a bear crawl to the roll-up door and jumps up and into the parking lot for a 50-meter sprint and back pedal. And while a few of the preteens butcher the agility ladder with giggles and smirks, the new kid dances nimbly through it, accepting an unsolicited fist bump from a little dude heading back out for another sprint. The trainers are jawing away at the kids, but they're watching carefully, too—not just for cars; they're noting movement as well.

Back inside, the class circles up around one of the older teens for a bit of skill work on the hang power clean. Again, the new kid follows along. A trainer is next to him immediately, reinforcing the points of performance being explained by the class leader. The kid is not bad; squishy shoes, not quite executing triple extension, but generally grasping the dip-shrug-drop-stand cue.

His attention is constantly drawn to the girl. Not because he thinks she's cute, but because she's lifting more weight than just about anyone in the class.

Back outside again, the clock running, the new kid does his best with 5-lb. dumbbells. Deep within the Hurt Locker, he spies his mom, silhouetted against a rectangle of arctic white light from an open door; she's chatting with some other spectating parents while watching the goings-on.

He thinks, "Dip-shrug-drop-stand. Man, this is hard."

A trainer comes and goes, cueing and encouraging. To either side of him, kids of various sizes work with different-sized dumbbells or unloaded bars. His eyes keep sliding to the line of big dawgs in front of him. A couple of boys about his age sling about heavy barbells with ease and



Trainers keep a close eye on the teen athletes during the entire class, offering cues, motivation and encouragement.

a few little dudes clean their lighter bars with pugnacity and grace. But his attention is constantly drawn to the girl. Not because he thinks she's cute, but because she's lifting more weight than just about anyone in the class and never seems to stop moving between the barbell and the 36-inch stack of tires she's leaping on. He puts down his dumbbells and jogs toward a 20-inch box and begins jumping, thinking, "Man, I want to do that."

References

1. Arthur W, Bennett W, Stanush PL, and McNelly TL. Factors that influence skill decay and retention: A quantitative review and analysis. *Human Performance* 11(1): 57-101, 1998.
2. Bianco AT, Higgins ET, and Klem A. How "fun/importance" fit affects performance: Relating implicit theories to instructions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29(9): 1091-1103, Sept 2003.
3. Dorfman HA. *Coaching the Mental Game: Leadership Philosophies and Strategies for Peak Performance in Sports—and Everyday Life*. Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003.
4. Faigenbaum AD. Age- and sex-related differences and their implications for resistance exercise. *Essentials of Strength Training and Conditioning* (3rd ed.). Baechle TR and Earle RW, eds. Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 2008. 141-158.
5. Faigenbaum A and McFarland J. Relative Safety of Weightlifting Movements for Youth. *Strength and Conditioning Journal* 30(6): 23-25, December 2008.

6. Gladwell M. *Outliers: The Story of Success*. NY: Bayback Books, 2011.
7. Glassman G. Broad, general, inclusive fitness: Explanation from Coach Glassman's seminar lecture, Santa Cruz, CA 7-07-07. Available at <http://crossfitcle.com/2007/12/broad-general-inclusive-fitness-1.html>. Accessed July 24, 2011.
8. Glassman G. Understanding CrossFit. *CrossFit Journal* 56, 1-2, April 2007.
9. Glassman G. What Is CrossFit? *CrossFit Journal* 19, 1-7, March 2004.
10. Goodson J. "Dude, this is a league game." *CrossFit Journal* 1-6, July 2011.
11. Higgins ET, Cesario J, Hagiwara N, Spiegel S, and Pittman T. Increasing or decreasing interest in activities: The role of regulatory fit. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98(4): 559-572, April 2010.
12. Martin J and Rodi C. The inherent responsibilities of training children and teens. *CrossFit Journal* 71(08): 1-5, July 2008.
13. Moore EWG. Developing a caring coaching climate fosters confidence. *Strength and Conditioning Journal* 32(5): 97-99, 2010.
14. Myer GD, Faigenbaum AD, Ford KR, Best TM, Bergeron, MF, and Hewett TE. When to initiate integrative neuromuscular training to reduce sports-related injuries and enhance health in youth? *Current Sports Medicine Reports* 10(3): 157-166, 2011.
15. Rogers WA. Assessing age-related differences in long-term retention of skills. *Aging and Skilled Performance: Advances in Theory and Applications*. Rogers WA, Fisk AD, and Walker N, eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 1996. pp 185-200.
16. Schuler L. 10,000 hours? Really? Available at <http://www.louschuler.com/blog/10000-hours-really/>. Accessed August 11, 2011.
17. Shibinski M. Teaching and coaching young athletes in the weight room. *NSCA Journal* 7(4): 60-61, 1985.



Courtesy of Dan Edelman

About the Author

Dan Edelman is a Level 1 and CrossFit Kids trainer with CrossFit Kids HQ at [CrossFit Brand X](#) in Ramona, Calif.