
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

What to Expect When Coaching Teens

Mentally and physically, teenagers are changing daily. Be ready. Bob Guere explains.

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August 2011



All images: Bob Guere

There are two essential elements in programming for pre-schoolers, adolescents and teenagers. One is to ensure fun is pre-eminent. The other is to define, recognize and program based on expectations.

Expectations should be glaringly different in each age group and certainly in your adult classes.

Many CrossFit affiliates wrongly lump the teen population with adults out of assumed necessity, convenience or ignorance. Yet there is opportunity to make a huge impact in a teenager's life if your expectations are in check and your programming follows.

Necessary Separation

The expectation that a teenager will thrive and succeed when included in an adult CrossFit program is misguided. Affiliates who tackle this without either hiring a CrossFit Kids trainer or sending a trainer to a CrossFit Kids course are taking their chances with the safety and success of the athlete.

Think of training teens as a long-term process in which you're preparing them for inclusion in the adult program.

Similar to training the elderly or special-needs adults, training teens requires the ability to scale, adjust and customize workouts based on a variety of situations. The age span of 12-17 years comes with an abundance of physical, mental and emotional changes. A trainer should expect a teen to be multiple athletes depending on the day. Rushing or forcing a workout goes well beyond the realm of just "suck it up, buttercup." It can lead to lasting injury and, more frequently, bad habits and self-doubt.

Let's consider this hypothetical situation: 13-year-old Billy is a slightly overweight freshman in high school who is somewhat active. He's never participated in organized sports but plays with friends more outside than inside. His family joins your affiliate. You either can place Billy in a teen class or in an adult class.



Teens are not adults and require a special approach in your affiliate.

Similar to training the elderly or special-needs adults, training teens requires the ability to scale, adjust and customize workouts based on a variety of situations.

If Billy is lumped in with the adults, he likely won't get the immediate attention he needs to address many of the common capacity deficiencies: squatting, lifting objects off the ground and overhead, and lifting his own body off the ground or, simpler, off the couch. In the adult program, Billy will constantly be trying to catch up, feeling inferior to the adult athletes despite the compassion of the trainer and classmates. The assumed expectation will be that Billy is equal to the adults and just needs to catch up. Without his peers, Billy might not give complete effort and might not have the extra incentive to push himself out of his comfort zone.

Conversely, if Billy is introduced to CrossFit in a dedicated teen program, he will, above all else, be among his peers. The chance for success among his peers is not only more valuable but expected. Friendships will develop. The social component of CrossFit cannot be understated. This is what builds our community, and it's no different among teens. In a teen class with qualified teen trainers, Billy will begin with the proper exposure to fundamental functional movements that are the basis for all athletic endeavors. Billy will not be playing catch-up. He will be among other teen athletes with similar deficiencies and capacities. From Billy's perspective, the expectation will be focused on proper movement and effort, not on an ill-placed measuring stick the adult class would impose.

Behind the Science

There are scientific reasons why your teens should be trained differently.

Teen athletes are developing rapidly, and their bodies are changing daily. An adult program does not take into account the real possibility—and high probability—that a teen will come in one day exhibiting what appears to be a massive brain dump.



Teens can be different athletes each day and require close attention.

How can they forget to squat overnight?

They haven't forgotten how to squat or press or deadlift or jump. Their equipment has changed. If a golfer trained for five years with the same set of clubs and then switched it with a set six inches longer, how do you think his swing might look? My educated guess is he would have to re-learn how to swing.

What if the equipment change was your legs? Or your arms? That's what happens when teens grow. Their bones change, their muscles and tendons lag, and boom—you've got teens who can't get the hips back or the knees out. They haven't forgotten how to squat; they need to re-learn how to squat.

Consider this scenario in an adult class, where your teen athlete is, essentially, a new student. What do you do with your new adult? Many gyms have an "indoc" or "on-ramp" class to teach the movements required to safely and efficiently perform CrossFit workouts. Are you going to send the teen back to on-ramp every time he or she grows? Of course not. But you should be prepared to take two steps back and start from scratch often.

Loads will need to be lessened or removed, and the movement will need to be re-learned. Most teen athletes who get lumped in with adults will be hesitant to mention to a trainer (again) that they are having problems with the movements or can't seem to get their body in position (again) and could use some help. This pulls the trainer away from the rest of the class (again) and is not fair to the teen or the rest of the adults. Keep your teens training together with a coach who has the passion and the patience.

Kids who train with weight are stronger and less injury-prone. Weight-bearing exercises increase bone density; joints and tendons become more robust.



As a teen, coordination and body awareness are just as important as strength.

Another scientific reason to train teens differently is that studies point to direct improvement in learning function when exercise is induced. Many CrossFit Kids programs, following the lead of CrossFit Kids HQ, have integrated “study hall” at the end of workout sessions. The enhanced brain function created by exercise makes kids ripe for learning. Exercise causes increased oxygen flow to the brain, more efficient synaptic activity, stimulated neurogenesis and increased production of various hormones responsible for growth and development of the brain. Expect smarter kids.

As important as the inclusion of exercise in a child’s learning pattern is the type of exercise. We know movements that take children to positions other than upright—horizontal, upside down—stimulate the vestibular system that accounts for a vast array of motor-function improvement. Information from your inner ear travels to and from your fingertips, muscles, joints and the soles of your feet, among other places. We see this as communication for limb position (can you say “good overhead press?”), muscle growth and development, and improved balance and coordination.

In addition to bone-density-increasing movements like box jumps and broad jumps, rolling, tumbling and handstands should be a staple in your child and teen programs. Many of these movements should come naturally to kids and might not be as welcome to your middle-aged adult class.

For more information on this topic, check out the research and writings of John Ratey, John Medina and Dr. Jon Gary, who is part of CrossFit Kids HQ.

In the discussion of science, it is important to mention one myth that continues resurfacing. It’s the one that claims weight-bearing movements are bad for growth plates and dangerous for youth. Dr. Gary covers this extensively in the CrossFit Kids course. Not only is the data to the contrary, but it’s also difficult to find legitimate data to even support the statement. Kids who train with weight are stronger and less injury-prone. Weight-bearing exercises increase bone density; joints and tendons become more robust. Growth-plate injuries are generally from impact incidents to the soft portion of the growing bones.

Programming

Programming for teens should not be complicated. Keep the rep schemes simple. AMRAPs work great in an environment ripe with personalities. They allow all the teens to work for the same amount of time, encouraging the community you are trying to develop.

Do not over-complicate movements either. Stick to the basic overhead movements—pull-ups, push-ups, jumps, rolls, running, etc.—and the foundational functional movements all humans do. Keep the high-skill movements for their own training period; introduce them only when mastered. Avoid taking teens into the met-con suck zone—30-plus minutes. A good long smoker can be helpful in team WODs with built-in rest, but long Hero-type workouts do not add much to the stimulus other than misery.

Next, expect your programming skills to be challenged.

The need for proper scaling in teen programming is paramount. Substituting movements appropriate for their developmental stage is a skill. Cultivating an environment in your teen class whereby the teens do not ostracize or otherwise demean an athlete who is substituting/scaling is also important. Learning to adapt your plan for the workout to each and every teen athlete can be a logistical challenge as well as a coaching challenge.

You are programming for many different athletes with many different abilities. Substituting and scaling is more than lowering weight and reps. Teen athletes will give coaches a unique opportunity to scale for very different reasons. As mentioned earlier, teens might show up with the apparent inability to perform a movement that was easily perfected just the day before. Your job as a teen coach is not to simply remove that movement from the workout but to sub a movement that allows the same stimulus without compromising the safety of the movement and, hopefully, addresses the new-found capacity degradation.

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For instance, a 13-year-old girl who has been CrossFitting for two years comes in after a week at grandma's house. She looks different, almost taller. Surely she is. During the warm-up, you notice her squat is atrocious—knees flying forward, chest crashing down. To keep her in the workout and to begin the re-learning process, a simple air squat can be performed with hips facing a wall or knees facing a bench. This simple sub works wonders for growing teens and will have your athletes fixing their own squats very quickly.

Another technique is having them draw outlines of their feet on the ground for proper foot position. For those days when the set-up just isn't working, a visual cue is very handy. Reiterate the proper set-up for the deadlift—feet underneath shoulders—while at the same time having the athlete look to place his or her feet in the outlines. Seems simple and almost kindergarten-like, but this isn't rocket science. Find what works for your athletes. But I caution you not to sub something out of the workout simply because an athlete "can't" do it that day. Find what part of the movement is giving fits and work that. Any other approach might prolong or enforce the decreased capacity.

On Rhabdo

Another important aspect of training teens is the increased risk of rhabdomyolysis that is present with this age group.

Not only are they easily susceptible, but they also present less symptoms than adults.

Adults can present any or all of three common symptoms: severe pain, weakness and cola-colored urine. Teens usually only present one of the three—and good luck guessing which it will be.

It is important to keep a close eye on your teens (and all kids) during every workout. Always ask about their day, how they feel, if they are sore, etc. If you haven't seen them in a few days, ask if they've been ill. Teens' rhabdo probability goes up after illness. Give them a few days of scaled workouts until they are back to full capacity. Avoid high-rep eccentric movements with teens—this can also increase their risk for rhabdomyolysis. Exercises like jumping pull-ups, negative movements and downhill running are all eccentric in nature. A vigilant coach will not have to worry about rhabdo.

Nutrition Talk

Nutritional advice and prescription should be different than it is for the adult population of your gym as well.

Many adults are concerned with leaning/weight loss. Teens should be taught about long-term health and fueling their body for exercise. Quality of food over quantity for teens is better. Teens should be taught the importance of quality protein, fat and carbohydrate sources. They should be taught how to make better choices in social environments and how to not feel guilty when they don't.

Building a foundation of movement in the teen years rather than throwing them to the wolves with Fran will set up teens for even greater success when they enter adult CrossFit.

Especially important with teenage girls, the “cheat meal” or “cheat day” should not be frowned upon as a failure but regarded as an acceptable part of an otherwise well-managed diet. Kids should be taught that what the schools teach them concerning the food pyramid is erroneous and really upside down. If you are successful in getting teens to eat solid protein sources at breakfast in a household otherwise not CrossFit-friendly, you have exceeded expectations. Teens do not control the grocery list. Parents who do not CrossFit might not understand the importance of our way of eating and certainly won’t want you telling their kids how to eat, for the most part. Expect battles with teens and parents and expect to relish in small victories where food is concerned.



By building a solid foundation as a teen, young athletes give themselves every chance for success as an adult.

The Importance of Movement Development

This is the good stuff.

Building a foundation of movement in the teen years rather than throwing them to the wolves with Fran will set up teens for even greater success when they enter adult CrossFit.

CrossFit Kids HQ has the longest test program so far with teens like Connor Martin and David Shanahan, who are 19 years old with between six and seven years of CrossFit under their belts. They learned to move their bodies, and move them well, long before load was introduced. By teaching them to move, it made them stronger. The ability to control their bodies as they began to add load to movements has made a huge difference in their training. These young men are now putting up numbers that would make most, if not all, top-tier male athletes proud. Stick with the plan. Movement before load and you can’t go wrong. Expectations for your teens should be nothing less than stellar if you have them for six years.

Once teens have been held to that high standard of movement performance, they will begin to show capacity to gain strength quickly. They will enjoy steady, frequent gains in their performance. Expect it. It will happen.

A lifting program based on form first and steady, incremental, weekly increases in 5-, 3- and 1-rep loads will seldom stall. And when they do reach stalls, they are usually timed with changes in the athlete’s body, schedule, etc. Plateaus are rarely seen throughout the teen years when this steady, patient programming is followed. There is no need to shoot for large-volume lifting or complicated programming. Basic core lifts—i.e., deadlift and back squat—can and should be worked weekly in this regimen.

A good teen lifting program works three main points: it’s fun, it’s safe, and the kids get stronger.

CrossFit Kids HQ prescribes an easy, two-day-a-week lifting program for teens, with other lifts sprinkled throughout the workouts during the week. One day for back squat, one day for deadlift, and on each of those days the kids perform movement review and unloaded demonstration. That covers the safety portion of this program. They increase load in sets of 3s until a PR is achieved. And at that point, the athlete is done lifting for the day. Wash, rinse, repeat every week. Back squatting and deadlifting will increase their total body strength unlike any other movement.

On each of those two days, accessory lifts also can be included, as well as an opposing or complementary Olympic lift. For instance, on back-squat day, push jerks for reps of 5 to PR might be included, or cleans on deadlift day.

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The important part to pick up here is that they PR every week and the athlete is never overloaded. Remember, it's fun! Less is more with kids; they *will* get stronger. It happens almost magically, and to an aging athlete like myself, it can be sickening. As a coach, it's wonderful to watch. Kids who PR every week come into and leave every workout with a positive attitude. They know they'll PR that day, and they leave with a PR.

When a plateau is observed, the coach should then switch that athlete away from a 3-rep scheme and move to a 5-rep scheme and work 5-rep PRs for a while. If all the wheels fall off the cart, speed drills and form work in 7-rep schemes are always in the back pocket. But they can PR 7 reps, too!

If an athlete begins to lose form in a movement, coaching cues are used and another rep is allowed for correction. If a teen athlete cannot get his or her form back in 2 reps, remove the bar and lower the weight. Too many pieces can be broken if you do not. Remember, there are tons of variables with teens' growing bodies. It's best to just step back, lower the weight and work some 7-reppers for the day until they can re-master the movement.

Periodization

Teen programming might change during the year for a variety of reasons.

If your teen athletes play sports, training volume should be marginally decreased during that particular season. But be careful not to succumb to the urge of team coaches who believe CrossFit during the season is too much. Rather, attempt to develop a good rapport with the coach and explain the benefits of your program and how it will benefit your athlete if he or she continues your program, even if pared down slightly, during the season. Maybe in the process you'll gain more clients. Explain how your program requires less time and produces greater results than traditional conditioning, and how that means more time for sport-related skills and drills.

Remember, expectations are key.

Expect your athletes to be of high capacity when they hit the field. Express to their coaches that these are not ordinary kids; they possess the makings of world-class athletes, and removing CrossFit might (will) diminish their capacities.

Observed Recovery and Progress

Teens have an astonishing ability to recover quickly.

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Case in point: the previously mentioned David Shanahan. David was training at CrossFit Brand X for the 2009 CrossFit Games at 17 years old. He approached his coach with a crazy idea: in the middle of CrossFit Games prep, he wanted to run a marathon. Coach Jeff Martin frowned upon the idea and told David if he did run the marathon, he better be ready to show up Monday and continue training. David did run the marathon, in cargo shorts, texting the whole way, and returned Monday to smoke his coach in that day's met-con.

A marathon leaves normal people wrecked for days, some longer, but not David. Why? I don't think we really know, and it might not really matter. David is an athlete with great capacity to work and recover. You'll see this in your teens as well. Just be mindful of letting them out of the barn too often. There is no need to induce any over-use injuries.

Properly trained athletes can withstand normal injury rates and enjoy increased recovery.

I train a high-school varsity-girls soccer team. The girls learn early in the season that they will not be out-run. We might be out-coached or out-skilled but will not be bested by conditioning. My team of 26 girls also suffered zero knee injuries in 2011 in a high-school sport rife with the problem. They all know how to squat and have a strong foundation of hip recruitment that prevents many common knee injuries. They're stronger and faster, and they have fewer injuries.

Your expectations should be real, and they should be high. Expect to be challenged, expect to be proud, and expect your teens to succeed.



About the Author

Bob Guere is the owner and trainer at [CrossFit Kids California City](#). Guere runs a nine-week summer camp and is a strength-and-conditioning coach for area high-school soccer teams. CrossFit Kids California City operates out of a garage affiliate and travels to the athletes wherever team practice occurs. Guere has been married to his wife, Kerry, for 18 years and has a 15-year-old daughter, Whitley, who will be participating in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games CrossFit Kids exhibition.

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