

# Community Building In Indoor Climbing Gyms: Part 3 - Youth

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Posted By: **Bix Firer** in [CWA Blog](#)



One of the most common challenges climbing gyms face is simultaneously managing youth programs and day-to-day operations.

Limited space, the overlapping and potentially conflicting needs that arise during our busiest hours, and managing the expectations of families and members all present challenges gyms must overcome.

## Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** The Headwall Group, renowned programming experts within the indoor climbing industry. They presented a highly successful CWA Summit session and have written for the CWA for many years.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is primarily for program staff but also senior management and even owners.
- **What Will You Learn:** How to use your youth programs to activate your membership. This has the added benefit of having actionable tasks that you could start doing as soon as next week.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** This is the third article in a series on community building in indoor climbing gyms. [Definitely read the first and second one!](#)

Throughout our time working with gyms across the U.S. and Canada, we've helped create



meaningful plans to confront these challenges. And, in this work, we've discovered that youth programs aren't just another program to manage, they can create unique and meaningful opportunities to engage young climbers, families, and customers to build community and drive brand success.

Here are some winning strategies that can use youth programs to drive community development at your gym.

## **Be transparent about your team's needs and goals**

The most successful programs we have seen integrate youth climbing teams into daily operations are clear about their team's needs.

Utilizing visual signage like a whiteboard or screen to announce where your youth teams will be in the facility allows members to engage or avoid, as they like. But you can take this a step further.

Communicate visually with members what skills your teams are working on or what competitions they are preparing for.



This allows your members to engage and support the young climbers. It can encourage them to buy into the team's success and see your community in action for themselves.

Rather than vying for space, you will notice members sharing information regarding the skills they're developing, checking in with coaches and youth about their competitions, and integrating the different components of your membership. It can even encourage your members who have kiddos to get their children involved. Inversely, the kids may lobby their parents for involvement.

## **Engage families during practices.**

While some families choose to drop off their youth or climb on their own during practices or camps, try to intentionally build programming schedules to encourage families to come in at the same time as the young people they enrolled in your youth programs.

Be sure to advertise these overlaps in your communications around youth programs. Offer yoga, fitness classes, adult instruction, or a structured social event during team practices. This allows the adults who already trust you with the children in their lives to buy-in to the gym experience, increase engagement, and feel more like a part of your community.

## **Engage your members in supporting your teams.**

When your youth teams are preparing for a competition, take the time to make your membership aware of this and engage them in actively supporting the teams. This can take



many forms.

Post rankings, schedules, and information about competitions around the gym.

Preparing for a big competition? One gym we worked with created a sign-making station near their check-in desk so that members had the opportunity to decorate a sign that would go to comps to cheer the young climbers on.

Are you hosting a competition? Consider ways to engage your members in the event rather than just closing the gym or inviting spectators. Are volunteers needed? Cheerleaders? Hosts for visiting teams? Offer these opportunities to your members, so that they can feel connected to the healthy competition and community your youth programs build.

## **Make sure your youth programs give back, and let members know.**

To create a sense of reciprocity and service, youth teams should also be seen supporting the goals and events that serve your general members. Are you hosting a friendly comp for members? Your teenage team members can be employed to keep score or manage the check-in table.

Younger members can help decorate the gym before a Halloween competition. Or you can create a team category for youth and adults, allowing the families of young climbers to participate alongside their children.

If you choose to employ any of these engagement strategies, it's essential to communicate them through social media, newsletters, or announcements in the gym. This reciprocity can go a long way in integrating youth programs and adult membership.

## **Connect with the community outside your gym.**

Youth programs and teams can be an amazing opportunity to connect with the broader fitness and recreation community in your city. Are there corporate or small business partnerships that you can build to support your team?

What volunteer or development opportunities exist in your area that can connect your climbers to the community? One gym we worked with would take young climbers bouldering outdoors and clean up the local crag as an end-of-season celebration. At another gym we worked with, they invited professional athletes to talk to the young climbers and adult members, following an indoor dry tooling comp.

Consider place-based ways like these that your youth programs can use to help demonstrate thought leadership and connectivity to your community.

While building and managing youth programs in your gym will undoubtedly pose unique challenges, it's important to approach it with an opportunity-based mindset.



Regularly **assessing your youth programs and how they fit into your broader community is essential to making key decisions** and changes that will keep you moving closer to the goals of your programs and gym community.

Hopefully, you're able to try out some of the ideas we've shared here and if you do, we would love to hear about it so feel free to reach out to us at Headwall and let us know how it's going!

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## About the Headwall Group



The [Headwall Group](#) was founded by Bix Firer and Pat Brehm. Bix Firer (MA, University of Chicago) is an Associate Professor of Outdoor Studies at Alaska Pacific University and has worked as a wilderness educator, trainer, facilitator, and experiential educator for over a decade.



Pat Brehm works as a professional organizational trainer and has spent his career as a climbing coach, facilitator, and outdoor educator.



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