

# Managing Infants In Indoor Climbing Gyms

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Posted By: **Hayley Moran** in [CWA Blog](#)



When I was only a climber and hadn't begun routesetting, I studied Child and Family Studies at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. During my time there, my interests bounced back and forth between parental practices and family policy - and sometimes how one influenced the other. Eventually, that led me to a public health career where I helped create health policies in Nashville that reduced infant mortality (much grimmer than routesetting, I know).

## Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Hayley Zumwalt (formerly Moran) who has been a writer for the Climbing Wall Association for more than three years. She's focused on routesetting but has expertise in management and child studies.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for senior managers and gym owners in the indoor climbing industry.
- **What Will You Learn:** Current policies around babies in the gym, maintaining a family-oriented status, and future implications as climbing grows.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** This is the first article of its kind on this subject matter, but we hope to explore it more!

If you're wondering where I'm going with this - I think about babies, a lot. And as we continue to see climbing gyms more popularized, I've seen more and more babies and toddlers in the gym.

Bringing babies into indoor climbing gyms is a topic that garners mixed opinions within the climbing community. Some indoor climbing gyms have specific policies allowing or disallowing



babies, while others leave it up to the discretion of individual climbers and parents.

## The Current Status of Keeping Infants Contained (and Happy!)

I've seen several creative strategies for parents to keep children contained and happy while getting a session in. Just anecdotally, I've seen parents set up a pack-and-play in the center of the rope area stocked with toys to keep the child occupied just like they were at home. I've also seen parents keep their children in car seats or strollers nearby while they climb, although I do not support this for infants for more than 30 minutes at a time due to increased risk of plagiocephaly or 'container baby syndrome.'

Tip: While most gyms currently do not offer childcare, my suggestion would be **to have a pack and play that parents can essentially check out as part of the gym's equipment.**

I've learned recently that some indoor climbing gyms in the Western U.S. already offer this, I haven't seen this as a standard offering in the Southern U.S. yet. This is both better for a child's development and mitigates the risk of a child running out of a parent's reach if they are climbing.

If a gym's insurance is iffy, I would at least make it known that parents can bring their own pack-n-play into the gym, given that it's nearby the parents and the child is still supervised.

## Current Infant / Toddler Programming

Aside from keeping a child contained and safe in the gym, another question is how can we support new parents in maintaining their climbing membership status while also balancing the demands of caring for their child?

Some gyms have adapted to this demand by offering more toddler-specific programming to get younger children into climbing before they are old enough to start youth programming.

Fellow CWA writer, Hailey Cassie, created a program at The Crag called Wee Rock which caters to children ages 3-5 and is a 6-week league that consistently books up. This program allows parents to get in their session while their child is in the same building. It also introduces the child to climbing at a younger age, furthering most gyms' mission to create lifelong climbers.

If a parent wants to get their young child into climbing outside of a program, it is best to recommend they start with either a kid zone (if the gym has one) or on some auto belay routes.

While there is no standard age a child can start climbing, most auto belays require a child to be at least 25 pounds.



# Safety Considerations

There are obvious and ongoing safety concerns surrounding infants in the gym; such as children running underneath climbers, children climbing unsupervised, and general clumsiness. There are also several unknowns regarding the safety of infants in climbing gyms.

For example, it is no secret that all gyms aren't the most sanitary and can cause illness. Near constant chalk inhalation, faced by gym employees (and especially routesetters) can also be an unknown issue. Additionally, if an infant is present while routesetting is occurring, it should be noted that the infant should be far away from the drill noise as their ears are far more sensitive than an adult's ears.

Advice: Unless you have a specific gym policy, **the parent must decide what they feel comfortable exposing their child to.** An employee should not comment on such things unless it is a direct safety violation.

## Additional Considerations

Infants or toddlers in the gym can have little to no impact on other climbers or a huge impact, depending entirely on how the situation is managed. Babies can be noisy and may cause disruptions for other climbers in the gym. Crying, fussing, or loud noises from infants may affect the concentration and enjoyment of other climbers.

Once a child has interfered with others' climbing experiences and a climber has complained, it is up to the front desk to mitigate the disruption. Open communication between gym staff and parents, following rules, and consideration for the safety and comfort of all climbers ensure a positive experience for everyone. Most gyms aim to remain as accommodating as reasonable for their members, and I believe we will see gyms becoming more family-oriented as the brunt of those accommodations.

From my perspective, we're currently at a crossroads where parents are trying to figure things out on their own while still maintaining their (often largely important) identity as a climber and community members of their gym. Parents are making decisions to make it work for them when gyms can offer more support to keep parents as members and possibly create future youth program participants. I hope that as we continue to expand as an industry, we continue to prioritize how we can make the transition from climber to parent.

## About the Author



Hayley Zumwalt is a USAC L3 freelance routesetter and is 1/3 of the Siege Climbing Triad. She is passionate about changing the climbing industry by creating events and discussions that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion through the sport of rock climbing, specifically within routesetting programs. When Hayley is not climbing, you can find her binge reading, baking, or keeping her cats out of trouble.

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