

Youth Programs In A Busy Climbing Gym

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in [CWA Blog](#)



One of the biggest struggles many facilities face is how to effectively integrate programs, and youth programs specifically, into the gym during busy times.

Article At A Glance

NOTE: An earlier version of this article was incorrectly attributed to a different author.

The mistake was due to editor's error.

- **Writer:** Tuesday 'Kirby' Kahl, an accomplished coach and past presenter at the CWA Summit. She has written for the CWA for two years.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for our coaches and program staff.
- **What Will You Learn:** Strategies for balancing youth programming with the rest of the gym ecosystem.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** Kirby's first article for the CWA discusses [why kids matter in the first place at a climbing gym](#), and would be a good precursor for this article.

Entry-Level Youth Programming

There are a few tools that can help integrate this group into your facility's culture with ease. In brand-new youth climbers, standard climbing gym etiquette may be less known. All lessons must have at least some educational component or reinforcement around gym etiquette.

Younger kids often get out of school earlier than other age groups. Scheduling programming for younger ages before your main rush can help minimize interactions while ensuring your youngest climbers get ample space for their programming.

For example, if school is out by 2:30 p.m., you could begin classes between 3:00-3:30 p.m., ensuring that even if you have two-hour programming, this group leaves before the big 6:00 p.m. rush hour. This can be limiting for some working families, and it's worth considering not only your local school district's schedule but the approximate distance and travel times to your facility from those schools.

When working at a climbing gym that neighbored a school, we could pick kids up, walk them over, begin programming shortly thereafter, and have them exiting the facility before the evening rush arrived. However, when working at a gym that was in a more urban area and further from schools, programs had to begin later due to travel times, and a heavy emphasis on etiquette was a must in all programs.

We also brought in our youngest climbers on Wednesday and Friday evenings, traditionally less busy days for us.

Recreational Youth Programs

This group is somewhere between the brand-new, youngest, and more impulsive climbers and less seasoned than a classic competitive team. This group often represents kids and families committed to your programs but who may be on the younger side or aren't interested in competition or training at a high level or frequency.

Etiquette should be an essential component of all programs, but this age group may not need the same frequency of reminders as newer climbers. Encouraging kids in this age group to ask questions and interact with the member base can be a key element to building a healthy relationship between members and young athletes.

This group is likely in the gym a couple days a week, and eventually will age out and become part of the larger member base. As a coach, I encourage this group to check in with members as they navigate climbing spaces. Including asking if folks are taking another lap on a climb, waiting for a climb, etc. These interactions help build better relationships and increase visibility, rather than relying on a coach as a facilitator.

Competitive Team Programs

Having spent a long time as a competitive coach, I think it's important to integrate this group into your member base as much as possible. These are the faces of your program, and an expectation of exemplary etiquette, communication, and sportsmanship is necessary.

They are still children and need space for play and will struggle with volume moderation and impulse control sometimes—this is normal.

After integrating this group, I have seen members purposefully break etiquette because the

person on the receiving end of the infraction was a team kid. There's a line for all parties on practicing exemplary etiquette in the gym and advocating for yourself when others do not do the same.

As a coach, if an athlete is slighted, I often step in as their advocate if they wish to say something. I'll sometimes hand them the opportunity to have the interaction, depending on the situation, also.

Occasional reminders of gym etiquette or addressing specific situations as they occur may be needed with this group. I'd recommend clearly defining expectations for this group as they join the program.

I've seen the most success in competitive team athletes integrating into a busy gym by encouraging ample communication and expectation setting.

General Ideas

We've talked about some different ideas about programming, and while there are a couple of common themes, like gym etiquette and timing, there is more we can do from a general perspective.

One option is to reserve certain gym areas for programming and provide ample signage and notifications to other gym users. Kids and adults in programming alike have paid more to receive these services, and a brief closure could improve everyone's experience by ensuring class participants have dedicated space and members don't have to navigate and share space with a class.

Generally, **brief closures tend to keep everyone happier** than attempting to share a space where no one's desires are fully met.

Most of these concepts focus on the management of your youth programs, but it is equally important to train your member base. Clear signage, including programming times, not only informs your member base of times when they need to share space but also acts as marketing for your programs.

Additionally, how you respond to members who lodge complaints about team kids and how you advocate for your programs are all training for your member base on how you want them to respond. When a member complains, do you sympathize and darn those team kids? Or do you validate their concerns and explain how you go about navigating the sharing of space?

Folks in your programs, whether adults or kids, are paying additional funds to use your facilities and receive instruction, so we need to advocate for them and support them.

Members are not always incredibly kind to youth program participants. Some complaints may be well-founded as kids historically lack some impulse and volume control or may not make the

best decisions.

This doesn't mean your members are immune to the same issues and shouldn't be encouraged to practice the same etiquette we encourage among youth program members.

What Did You Think?

The CWA is committed to providing content that is valuable, actionable, and fun to read. This is not the place for clickbait and incorrect information. Tell us what you think in our one-minute anonymous survey.

About the Author



Tuesday "Kirby" Kahl is a movement specialist, passionate instructor, and athlete. She is the Programs Director of Skyhook Bouldering in Portland, Oregon. Kirby has worked every job in a climbing gym, from manager, retail buyer, routesetter, and everything in between, but her true passion is instruction. Kirby's primary populations are youth and adaptive competitive athletes, but she loves assisting climbers of all ages and abilities and helping them reach their goals. She is a student at Portland State University

studying Applied Health and Fitness and minoring in Neuroscience. She has been coaching for the last 15 years across several sports, enjoying a bubbling career as a swim coach before falling in love with climbing. You can find her bouldering, multi-pitching, competing, or backcountry skiing when she's not in school or coaching. Off the wall, she's a dedicated plant mom and painter.



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