
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

How We Teach

Coaching children requires different vocabulary and delivery. Jeff Martin explains.

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May 2012



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People come to CrossFit from many backgrounds.

Often, everything about CrossFit is new and, if we are honest, learning the simplest things is often comical as we move toward mastery of the movements. Similarly, CrossFit trainers frequently have varied backgrounds and must learn skills on the job. Often, they don't have a defined way of teaching and can go about it haphazardly. This can be disastrous when working with children. Not only will the information not transfer effectively, but if the method of transmission is not efficient, one will not hold the attention of the kids. At CrossFit Kids, we have a clearly defined way to teach that is effective and efficient.

1 of 5



When teaching kids, every movement must have a reason. Why do we deadlift? To safely pick up heavy objects and get beastly strong.

We begin with a demonstration of the movement from different angles at full speed. Say we are teaching the snatch to a group of pre-teens. We bring out one of our teen firebreathers and have him or her snatch a moderate weight. We get a couple of very important things out of this.

Explaining the movement isn't just about hitting the points of performance . . . It's also about providing a reason why kids should want to do the movement.

First, the pre-teens idolize the teen firebreathers. Every one of them wants to be that firebreather. If he is snatching, then they want to—have to—snatch. They are almost shaking with anticipation.

Second, because we have demonstrated the movements from different angles, we are able to note the key points of performance we want the kids to understand. Kids hear about those points, but they also see their role model doing those things we say are important. This could result in the triggering of mirror neuron mechanisms that can aid in the transformation of these observations into future action (1); i.e., this can facilitate learning.

A cue is short; it is something you, as the coach, and the client agree means something. Cues can be words, gestures, or even grunts or looks.

After demonstrating the movement, we explain it. Explaining the movement isn't just about hitting the points of performance, though that is critically important; it's also about providing a reason why kids should want to do the movement. They already want to do the movement because their role model is doing it (2), but let's cement that.

"What is a deadlift, guys? It's how we move something from the ground to our waists in a safe manner."

"What is the hang clean? It's how we move something from our waists to our shoulders efficiently."

"Why do we deadlift? To get beastly strong."

These are just some of the short, simple statements you can make that will provide kids with a practical reason to perform the movement.

Cue Is for "Quick"

We next have the firebreathing role model slow the movement down so we can begin to attach cues to the points of performance. We had a very good coach who, for all his talent, often cued people cleaning with something like, "I need you to keep your midline stable while jumping the weight through the range of motion." Folks, this is a paragraph, not a cue. A cue is short; it is something you, as the coach, and the client agree means something. Cues can be words, gestures, or even grunts or looks.



Keep cues short, simple and specific, especially when teaching kids: “Chest up!”

We once had a young female client who was born with hip dysplasia in her right hip. If she didn't concentrate on pushing her knees out while squatting, her right leg would flop in. At first, I had to stand next to her and say, “Courtney, knees.” As time went on I could stand across the room and make a gesture with my hand and she would fix the knee. Eventually, all I had to do was raise my eyebrows. My raised eyebrows became the cue, “Push your knees out.”

Telling a child to place his feet shoulder width apart can bring hilarious results.

If we are teaching the air squat, we might point out that the weight is in the heels. We might say, “We want your weight to stay on your heels. If your weight moves to the middle of your foot or toes, you will hear coaches say,

“Heels.” For the new kids in class, “heels” becomes the cue. We do this with all the primary points of performance.

Start, Go, Finish—Landmarks to Proper Execution

Whenever we introduce a new movement, we want to teach three things:

- Where we start.
- Where we go to.
- Where we finish.

We want to be very definitive with kids about what we expect them to do. By telling them where we want them to start, go to and finish—i.e., count the rep—we remove the anxiety some children feel in learning new things by being very exact about three important points in the movement.

Where We Start

This seems straightforward enough. If we are teaching the squat to adults, we can say, “Put your feet shoulder width apart.” With kids, it's just not that simple.



A well-defined start and finish position will help kids count their reps and maintain good form.

Telling a child to place his feet shoulder width apart can bring hilarious results. Some kids don't know where their shoulders are, and you cannot blame a child who defines his feet as the ends of his toes. Go ahead right now: stand up, place your toes at your shoulders and try to squat. We would first define for the kids what part of their foot we want lined up with their shoulders.

"These are your heels. These are your shoulders. I want you to match your heels to your shoulders. Very good. Look down at your feet. This is where your feet need to be when you squat."

Or make it more interactive: "Where are your shoulders? Where are your heels? Match your shoulders to your heels. Look down at your feet. This is where your feet need to be when you squat."

We can't be finished yet, though. We have to follow up with something like, "Stand up straight." Then we can say, "When we squat, this is where we start."

Where We Go

If we are teaching the shoulder press, we have the kids "hold up the sky."

The sky is directly overhead. And it's heavy. The kids straighten their arms and push the sky up to support that heavy, heavy weight. When they are in this position, we can tell them, "This is where you go to!"

Once we have defined where to start and where to go to with the shoulder press, how easy is it to define the path between those two points? "Start with your hands at your shoulders. Now hold up the sky." Pretty easy to get a straight path out of that.

Where We Finish

But we are not done yet.

Being definitive about where we want the kids to finish is a critical piece to the lesson. Where we finish is where we count the rep. This might be self-evident to adults, but it is not to younger children. Defining where we finish does two very cool things.

First, very young children generally don't have the ability to count in a one-to-one relationship. In other words, if you tell a 4-year-old boy to do 10 squats, he will often simply squat a couple of times while counting to 10 as fast as he can. Defining where we finish and the idea that we count a rep at the finish point helps young children learn and apply a one-to-one relationship between a number and a rep.

Better mechanics lead to increased efficiency and higher outputs displayed in better times.

Second, for older kids, and especially teens using weight, defining a finish point as the place we count the rep can stop common problems before they occur, as well as help establish and maintain good mechanics throughout even the most demanding WODs.

Take the thruster as an example. One of the most common problems we see is "crashing." Crashing is receiving the bar as you descend into the squat portion of the movement. As the WOD drags on, the bar is caught lower and lower. The person slams into the bottom of the squat with the midline in a compromised position, lungs compressed, the knees traveling in and the elbows ending up pointing at the ground. Screwed-up mechanics. It's not effective, it's not efficient, and it's probably unsafe.

With the thruster, CrossFit Kids defines the finish position as the point where the bar returns to the start position; i.e., knees and hips fully open, bar held in the rack position at the shoulders. By telling kids that they count the rep at this point and that if they bypass the point the rep does not count, we completely eliminate one of the most prevalent problems seen in the movement. Lest one think we slow down the WOD by demanding this, we have a clocked a 2:30 Fran from a 17-year-old using this technique. Better mechanics lead to increased efficiency and higher outputs displayed in better times.

Finally, we have the kids begin the movement at slow speed. Generally, we will create a stopping point at the three primary points: where we start, where we go to, where we finish. As the kids work through the movement, it gives the trainers a chance to assess movement. Individual trouble spots can be discussed and addressed. The whole process generally takes 5 to 8 minutes, and then the kids are on to the WOD.

Having a structure for teaching will help with any kind of training, but it is particularly important when working with kids.

By design, our framework dovetails with one of CrossFit's fundamental training precepts: mechanics, consistency, intensity. When training children, mechanics are where we start. We head toward consistency. And we finish with intensity. This is how we teach.

References

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2. Lockwood P and Kunda Z. Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*: 73(1): 91-103, 1997.



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About the Author

Jeff Martin owns and operates *CrossFit Brand X* with his wife Mikki Lee Martin, and they founded *CrossFit Kids* together. Jeff is Director of Youth Training for CrossFit Headquarters and holds the distinction of being one of a handful of instructors in the world to have been accorded the title *CrossFit Coach*. His kids are surprised each morning that he can dress and feed himself.