

Building Progression In Youth Programming

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in [CWA Blog](#)



“Hey there! My 7-year-old went climbing at a friend’s birthday party and hasn’t stopped talking about it. They are very strong for their age and I’m hoping to get them signed up for an advanced class. What do you have available?”

If you’re anything like me, you’ve received numerous emails like this one. The hope is that your indoor climbing gym has an offering to meet the needs of this customer and others like them. But what if you have only one offering? What does this new young climber do after they take the beginners class?

Climbing in a busy gym can be intimidating for new climbers of any age, but especially for new youth climbers. So, what is the key to maximizing engagement and keeping the stoke high for your youth climbers?

Providing the opportunity for them to progress through your youth programs.

Starting Point

Whether you’re starting from scratch or already have youth classes in your gym, you must start by establishing (or reviewing) your goals. At my indoor climbing gym, we used our Mission Statement and Values to design our offerings.

We want to enrich lives and foster friendships while delivering extraordinary experiences.

So, our goal is to provide our youth members with classes that continue to develop their

climbing skills while building upon their previous class. Both week-to-week within the class, and from one class session to the next. Over our five-week beginner course for those between the ages of 6-8, we begin by teaching them our gym rules, bouldering etiquette and top-rope safety checks. By the end of the five weeks, they've learned to identify hold types, climb with quiet feet, and start the journey of route reading.

For years, this was where our youth programs stopped. Members would retake them a couple of times before moving on to a different activity. As we reopened after pandemic-related closures, we saw an opportunity to build up our foundational programs we had been offering for years.

Benefits

Our indoor climbing gym is situated inside of a 600,000 square foot athletic club in Portland, Ore. Youth members have access to swimming, gymnastics, tennis, basketball, and the list goes on. With so many options, it is imperative for us to continue innovating our climbing programs and offering opportunities for progression to our members.

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While you may not be dealing with the same level of competition from other sources, new climbers, particularly new youth climbers, will only repeat the same content so many times before moving on. By creating an intermediate tier within the same age group, you achieve multiple outcomes.

First, you are giving your returning climbers the option to build upon their existing climbing skills. Second, by moving returning kids up to the next level of class, you free up spots in your beginner classes for actual beginners. This is not only beneficial for your customers, but it makes the class easier for your instructors to teach when participants are at similar skill and knowledge levels.

Finally, this provides your instructors with opportunities to level themselves up. Let's face it, teaching the same lessons over and over each shift can lead to burnout given enough time. By adding more advanced tiers, your instructors get a change of pace which can go a long way in developing their skillsets and keeping them engaged and motivated.

Creating Lifelong Climbers

A goal of many climbing gyms is to create lifelong climbers. Now that you have added advanced youth classes, you are in prime position to do just that!

For many youth climbers, to continue climbing with instructors will eventually require

joining the competitive team (if the facility has one). While this pathway may be the right choice for some, that's not always the case. So, what happens when a kid has completed the beginner and intermediate classes, but doesn't want to commit to climbing competitively?

This is where the third tier of youth classes comes in.

I like to think of these classes as the "rinse and repeat" option. They are focused on building a community of young climbers that love to climb and giving them a feeling of belonging to your facility. I've seen many indoor climbing gyms do this as part of their competitive program by creating a team that practices once a week and doesn't go to competitions. Others have created a class with a monthly cost that automatically renews until it's canceled. Both are viable options that keep kids engaged with your facility.

The next step in the third tier is placing the responsibility for the program among staff. In the two previous examples, the former places the onus on the coaches in the competitive program, while the latter gives responsibility to the instructors in your youth programs. At the end of the day, the most important thing is to create the opportunity. The exact details of how it is executed, and by whom, can be figured out down the road.

Creating options for progression through your youth programs is going to be a beneficial decision. Ultimately, the more options you provide for your customers in an area of demand, the better.

If your current youth classes only have a few kids sign up each time, then adding a handful of new options doesn't make a ton of sense. But if your youth classes are consistently full and you have to regularly turn potential customers away, then consider adding some more options. That way, when you get that email about your youth program options, you already have the perfect response.

How Do You Know Your Programs Are Working?

Programming is necessary for any indoor climbing gym, whether it's advanced big-wall climbing anchors or intro to bouldering classes. But how do you know they're working how you intend them to? We have a free resource for that.

[Download It Here](#)

About the Author



Isaac Shoman is a Portland, Oregon native and is the Climbing Gym Supervisor at the Multnomah Athletic Club. He has worked in the indoor climbing industry since 2010 when he was hired as a climbing instructor teaching youth summer camps. When he's not working, you can find Isaac cycling around Portland, climbing, running, or watching a game over a beer or two with friends! His favorite topics of discussion are anything Oregon Ducks or Portland Trail Blazers, "Star Wars" or "Lord of the Rings", or his nephew Luca.

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