

Optimizing Indoor Climbing Gyms For Programming

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Posted By: Kirby Kahl in [CWA Blog](#)



For many gyms, the busiest hours are weekday evenings, likely when the bulk of adult and youth programming occurs.

A dedicated programming space, or programming-focused space, is vital to successful programming and the interactions between the average member and your programming during busy hours.

Areas for programming can be worked into the initial gym design or created once the indoor climbing gym is built. Additionally, most gyms do or will have a youth team and other youth programming available.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Tuesday 'Kirby' Kahl, who is a new writer at the CWA for 2024. She currently focuses on coaching, training, and programming and serves on the CWA Content Committee. Join her pre-conference at the 2024 CWA Summit!
- **Who Should Read:** This article is primarily for gym owners and program managers who advocate to those gym owners.
- **What Will You Learn:** Tips, tricks, and steps for new gym owners, future gym owners, and current gym owners to make more use out of space for programming.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** Learn about [scaling up in indoor](#)

We've all heard a member moan and groan about team kids. However, with thoughtful space design, member optics can be drastically improved.

Dedicated programming spaces can still be open to members when not used for programming and are ideal for private lessons, clinics, and so much more. Multi-purpose spaces can contribute to thriving programming and a flourishing gym. So, how do we create them?

What makes an exceptional program space?

- Quiet, or quieter than the rest of the gym
- Has a large variety of hold types and sizes available
- Enclosed or partially enclosed
- Can hold 10+ people comfortably
- Has storage

Reducing Stimuli

The indoor climbing gym is often a busy and consequently loud and visually overwhelming space. There are often extensive echos and sounds that bounce off walls, making the gym floor loud. Walls are often multi-colored and host lots of hold shapes and colors.

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To provide better learning experiences, we need to create quieter spaces so students can focus and offer visual clarity and less stimuli so students can focus on their instructor, rather than the person taking a massive whip in the lead area. Offering a partially or entirely enclosed space can help tremendously with both aspects.

A dedicated spray wall or canyon accomplishes this nicely if it's suitable for both children and adults. Giving programs and youth teams their dedicated space can make them feel welcome and offers a less-cluttered environment for your members who may be sensitive to the stimuli in your gym.

Serving Different Populations

An indoor climbing gym's programming evolves as the member base becomes more

knowledgeable and experienced. A gym may begin with more introductory programming, but intermediate and advanced programming won't be too far behind.

A modular space that can be adapted to have large holds for dynamic and comp-y moves, a variety of hold types for newer climbers to learn on, and space to traverse and practice technique are all important considerations. Before committing to a space, consider the future of the gym's programming.

- Will you offer classes on dynamic and comp style movement?
- Will your bread and butter be introductory youth programming?
- Will you be offering lead programming that requires off-the-wall space?
- Do you want to offer gym-to-crag classes? Rappelling? Anchor building?
- What kind of skills will you need to be able to teach?
- How experienced and knowledgeable is your current (or soon-to-be) gym population?

Gyms in places like Colorado, Salt Lake City, and Seattle may need to introduce intermediate and advanced programming sooner than gyms in the Midwest, Louisiana, or Florida. **A youth team will need comp-style boulders to practice on if it's not part of your standard commercial setting.** Consider the variety of programming you may offer; ideally, it's nearly endless and tailored to the needs of your community.

You may want to look at what is offered in your area by guide services and other gyms to fill existing gaps. An important note is to ensure your space can hold 10+ people. Otherwise, you'll need to limit class sizes.

Lastly, storage is a key aspect of successful programming. Your instructors won't have to run across the gym for supplies, leaving class or children unattended, you can keep first aid materials and cleaning supplies available, and all the gear needed for your classes closer to where the action is happening. Consider a lockable cabinet or closet. Alternatively, you can create hideaway areas behind the climbing wall, cubbies, and unused spaces.

You'd be shocked how you can use your space for sneaky storage.

Considerations for Indoor Climbing Gym Design

If you're actively designing a gym, or about to, here are some excellent ideas I've seen in gyms across the country.

- A separate kids' canyon, or short spray wall, with a slim entrance for visual clarity and participant containment. This was complemented with a youth-accessible setting directly outside this chamber, making it an ideal space for youth programming and birthdays without frustration from the member base.

- Dedicated multi-purpose rooms, ideal for presentations, clinics, and staff training. This space can double as a birthday party room, and it may be worth having two or more if you plan to offer robust programming.
- A retail space with a lounge zone and TV, also great for clinics and small classes and presentations
- Lounge zones and community spaces. These can be shifted quickly to offer seating for clinics, presentations, and more
- Enclosed fitness and yoga spaces offer rooms for fitness and yoga classes and double as spaces for all other programming needs.
- A shorter, isolated belay instruction area. Folks scared of heights could start there, and it provides a space where participants look directly at that wall, vs the visual clutter of a busy gym behind them
- Spray walls tucked away in a training area, excellent for skill and technique classes
- Dedicated ledge for rappelling and anchor-building classes
- Spaces near the ground with a variety of bolts for anchor building and rope skills
- Modifiable and mostly enclosed traverse walls. These can be easily converted and used for competition or specialized classes.

My Gym is Already Built, Now What?

When a climbing gym is already built, dedicated programming spaces can be difficult to come by or create. Here are some relatively easy modification ideas that can transform existing gym spaces into functional programming spaces.

Get creative, ask your staff for ideas, and truly consider all your options! Your desk and programming staff are likely one of your best and most creative resources. You may even have folks on your staff or a facilities team member who can help build structures and envision new spaces.

Partial Dividers

Need more cubbies and a dedicated programming space? Consider adding a partial divider to block off part of a space. This creates plenty of extra storage (who doesn't need extra storage?) and creates visual and auditory clarity in your instruction space. Even a partial divider helps cut down on sound, too; part of that cubby space can double as storage for programming.

Storage Additions

Let's say you have a space that's often used for programming, but your instructors are hauling materials all over the gym. Can you support them with additional storage? Storage cabinets can be a huge help, these can be added to hallways, rooms or anywhere you have blank space. You can shift cubbies forward and/or add a door to add programming storage. Doors and locks on existing cubbies can also be beneficial. Adding hinges to a wall space can create behind-the-wall storage, add a shelf, and you've got quick storage options for programming, birthdays, and more.

Stantions

Utilizing stations to block off a space for your programming temporarily can be a quick fix. There are stations with built-in signage that look clean and professional. These aren't ideal but can also be used for competitions, directing traffic, blocking off spills or construction areas, setting spaces, and other uses.

Signage

Employing signage listing recurring programming can keep your members informed of the gym schedules and will eventually create behaviors where your member base avoids those areas during heavy programming times. Signage can be implemented for non-recurring programming, too, warning members of the need to share a space from x time to y time.

Setting Considerations

Where your most youth-accessible setting exists, your beginner climbers, youth programming, and instruction will occur. Consider creating an intended area with youth-accessible setting to center your programming around. Keeping this tucked away from busy member areas, the front desk, and other loud spaces can be critical.

This also provides opportunities for your instructors to consider and learn about height-accessible route-setting and create routes or boulders with an educational focus. This type of setting often offers exceptional learning opportunities for new and experienced setters alike. **Programming spaces can be one of your most valuable tools when educating and developing routesetters.**

Programming spaces, whether in a new or existing gym, will change and develop over time, adapting to the needs of your instructors and community. The key to creating top-tier programming spaces is adaptability and creativity. Your gym and your programming and member base will grow and evolve. Anticipating this evolution and being ready to grow with it will keep your gym, programming, and community thriving.

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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