

Structuring a Youth Combat Sports Program: A Field Guide for Coaches and Gym Operators

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About This Guide

This guide is written for martial arts coaches, gym operators, and combat sports instructors who want to build or improve a structured youth program — regardless of what discipline they teach.

The principles, frameworks, and standards described here are drawn from CS Combat Sambo League's experience developing and operating the CSL Youth Combat Sambo Program (CSL-YCP-001) in Jacksonville, Florida. They are shared freely because we believe the combat sports field as a whole benefits when more organizations operate with clear standards, documented curricula, and genuine youth protection protocols.

You do not need to be affiliated with CSL to use this guide. If something here is useful for your program, use it.

Part 1: Why Structure Matters in Youth Combat Sports

The Problem With "Figure It Out As You Go"

Most martial arts gyms that offer youth programming start the same way: an instructor who's good with kids begins teaching a youth class, and the program grows from there. This works — until it doesn't.

The absence of written standards creates specific, predictable problems:

Inconsistency. Without a documented curriculum, what gets taught depends entirely on who's teaching that day. Two instructors in the same gym may teach completely different things to the same age group, with no shared framework for what comes next.

No progression path. Without defined levels and advancement criteria, athletes and parents have no way to measure progress. "Doing great" is not a progress report.

Safety gaps. Without written safety protocols, safety depends on individual judgment rather than institutional standards. Individual judgment varies. Written standards don't.

Instructor turnover risk. When a key instructor leaves, an undocumented program often collapses. A documented program survives personnel changes because the knowledge is in the system, not in one person's head.

Youth protection vulnerabilities. Without explicit policies — background screening requirements, Two-Adult Rules, mandatory reporting protocols — programs are exposed to risks that written standards would have prevented.

What "Structured" Actually Means

A structured youth combat sports program has, at minimum:

A written curriculum with defined content for each age group or level

Documented advancement criteria so progression is objective, not arbitrary

Written safety standards covering the training environment, equipment, and physical contact

Clear instructor qualification requirements

Explicit youth protection policies including background screening and mandatory reporting

A consistent session format that instructors follow regardless of who's teaching

None of this requires a large organization or significant resources. It requires the discipline to write things down and the commitment to follow what's written.

Part 2: Building a Youth Curriculum Framework

Age-Appropriate Division Structure

One of the most important decisions in youth program design is how to divide participants by age and developmental stage. Age alone is an imperfect proxy — a 10-year-old who has trained for three years is developmentally different from a 10-year-old on their first day — but it provides a starting framework.

CSL's youth program uses three divisions:

Youngest Division (approximately ages 5–7)

At this stage, the primary goals are not technical. They are: learning to follow multi-step instructions, developing basic body awareness and coordination, learning to fall safely, and building comfort with supervised physical contact with peers. Technical content is minimal and foundational. The win at this stage is showing up, paying attention, and having a positive experience.

Middle Division (approximately ages 7–12)

Technical content begins in earnest. Athletes at this stage can follow more complex instructions, retain technique across sessions, and begin applying what they've learned with a partner under light supervision. This is where the real vocabulary of your discipline begins — throws, positions, submissions, striking combinations, depending on your discipline.

Advanced Youth Division (approximately ages 12–17)

Athletes at this stage are capable of more sophisticated technical learning, more complex sequences, and — where appropriate — competition preparation. Training at this level begins to look more like adult training, with the primary difference being that contact intensity and competitive pressure are still actively managed by instructors.

Defining Certification Levels

Within each division, define specific certification levels with clear, observable criteria for advancement. The key principles:

Make criteria specific and behavioral, not vague. "Demonstrates good technique" is not a criterion. "Can execute a hip throw from a standing grip with correct hip positioning and follow-through on three consecutive attempts with a cooperative partner" is a criterion.

Separate technical criteria from behavioral criteria. Technical readiness and behavioral readiness (focus, attitude, partner respect) are both valid advancement criteria and should be assessed separately.

Make advancement instructor-driven, not time-driven. Awarding levels based on months of attendance rather than demonstrated readiness devalues the system and misleads athletes and parents about actual progress.

Document the criteria in writing. Criteria that exist only in an instructor's head cannot be applied consistently across instructors or communicated clearly to athletes and parents.

Session Structure

A consistent session structure — one that every instructor follows regardless of who's teaching — is one of the most important elements of a structured program. CSL's youth sessions follow this arc:

Warm-Up (10–15 minutes)

Dynamic movement, coordination games, and falling practice. Falling safely is foundational to any grappling-based discipline and should be introduced early and reinforced consistently. For younger athletes, this portion of class often looks like play — that's appropriate and intentional.

Technical Block (25–35 minutes)

The instructor demonstrates a technique and breaks it into steps. Athletes drill those steps with a partner, with the instructor moving through the room to correct and encourage. Techniques are age-appropriate and introduced progressively.

Partner Practice (15–25 minutes)

Athletes apply what they've learned, at a pace and intensity matched to their age and experience level. For younger athletes, this is heavily supervised. For older athletes, it may involve more resistance — but always within instructor-set parameters.

Closing Circle (5–10 minutes)

Every session ends with individual acknowledgment. The instructor calls out specific things individual athletes did well — effort, improvement, helping a partner — not just who "won" a drill. This is non-negotiable. Every child leaves having been seen and acknowledged.

Part 3: Youth Protection Standards

This section covers the minimum standards that any youth combat sports program should implement. These are not CSL-specific — they reflect broadly accepted best practices for youth-serving organizations and, in many cases, requirements under Florida law (which may differ from requirements in other states; consult your state's regulations).

Background Screening

Every adult who has unsupervised access to minor participants should complete a background screening before beginning work with youth. In Florida, the relevant standard for youth-serving settings is Level 2 background screening — a fingerprint-based check that searches state and national criminal history databases. "Unsupervised access" means any situation in which an adult could be alone with a minor participant, even briefly. If your program involves adults in this situation, background screening is not optional.

Background screening should be renewed on the schedule required by your state's law.

The Two-Adult Rule

No adult instructor should ever be alone with a minor participant. Ever. At every session, at every location, there should be at least two qualified adults present. This is called the Two-Adult Rule, and it is the single most effective structural protection against abuse in youth sports settings.

If two adults cannot be present for a session, the session should not happen.

SafeSport or Equivalent Training

Every instructor who works with youth participants should complete training focused on recognizing and responding to abuse, misconduct, and grooming behaviors in youth sports environments. SafeSport (safesport.org) is the most widely recognized program in the United States for this purpose and is required by many national sports governing bodies.

This training gives instructors the tools to recognize warning signs and respond appropriately — and it gives parents confidence that the adults working with their children understand their obligations.

Mandatory Reporting

In every U.S. state, certain adults who work with children are designated as mandatory reporters — meaning they are required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect to the appropriate state authority. In Florida, this is the Department of Children and Families (DCF Hotline: 1-800-962-2873).

Every instructor in a youth combat sports program should understand their mandatory reporting obligations under their state's law, and programs should reinforce this obligation explicitly in instructor training and written policies.

Physical Contact Protocols

Grappling-based martial arts involve significant physical contact. This is inherent to the discipline — it cannot be eliminated. What can be managed is how that contact is introduced and supervised.

Recommended practices:

Introduce physical contact gradually, especially with new and younger participants

Make verbal consent and communication a habit — "I'm going to grab your arm, okay?" — so that checking in with a partner is normalized, not exceptional

Never force a participant to engage at a level of physical contact beyond their comfort

Watch for participants who seem distressed by physical contact and address it directly and privately

For programs serving at-risk youth or trauma-exposed populations, additional training in trauma-informed practice is strongly recommended before beginning work with those participants

Photography and Video

Establish a clear, written policy on photography and video of minor participants before you need one. The default should be explicit consent from a parent or guardian before any minor is photographed or filmed.

For programs that serve youth in foster care, domestic violence situations, or other circumstances where a child's location must be kept confidential, the default must be NO photography or video unless affirmatively cleared for each individual participant.

Part 4: Working With Community Partners and Referral Organizations

Youth combat sports programs have the opportunity to serve populations beyond walk-in enrollment — young people referred by schools, community organizations, juvenile justice programs, or child welfare agencies. This section covers the basics of building those partnerships effectively.

Why Referral Partnerships Matter

Walk-in enrollment reaches families who are already engaged enough to seek out a martial arts program. Referral partnerships reach young people who would never walk in on their own — kids in foster care, kids on probation, kids who've been disengaged from school or community activities for years.

These are often the young people for whom a structured, consistent activity can matter most. They are also the young people who are hardest to reach through conventional marketing.

What Referral Partners Need From You

Before a school, community organization, or juvenile justice program will refer youth to your program, they need to know:

That your program is safe. This means being able to show — not just say — that you have background-screened instructors, youth protection policies, and a trauma-informed approach to working with vulnerable youth. Written documentation matters here. "We're good people" is not enough.

That you understand their population. Youth referred through juvenile justice or child welfare systems have often experienced trauma. If your instructors haven't received any training on working with trauma-exposed youth, be honest about that and address it before accepting referrals.

That participant information will be protected. Many youth in these systems have confidentiality needs — their location, their involvement with DCF or DJJ, their history. Your program needs a clear policy on how participant information is handled and who has access to it.

That you can communicate reliably. Referral partners need to know that if something happens — a participant discloses something, misses sessions, shows signs of distress — you will communicate with them appropriately. Establish communication protocols before referrals begin.

Building the Partnership

Start with a conversation, not a proposal. Contact the organization, explain what your program offers, and ask what they need. Listen more than you talk. The best partnerships are built around what the referring organization needs for the young people they serve, not around what your program wants.

Follow up in writing. A simple letter of intent or memorandum of understanding — even an informal one — documents the relationship and clarifies expectations on both sides.

Part 5: Replicating This Model

The framework described in this guide — division structure, certification levels, session format, youth protection standards, community partnerships — is replicable. It doesn't require significant resources. It requires commitment to doing the work of documenting and following written standards.

If you're building a youth combat sports program from scratch, this guide gives you a starting framework. Adapt it to your discipline, your community, and your organizational context. The specific techniques you teach will differ from what CSL teaches. The structural principles don't need to.

If you're looking to implement a more complete version of the CSL model — including curriculum materials, certification system, instructor standards, and competition framework — CS Combat Sambo League™ offers a Licensed Training Center program that provides access to the full CSL documentation library and ongoing support. Information is available at combatsamboleague.com.

About CS Combat Sambo League™

CS Combat Sambo League™ is operated by AK Legacy INC, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Jacksonville, Florida. We are the first structured Combat Sambo sanctioning and training organization in the United States.

We developed this guide because we believe the combat sports field benefits when more organizations operate with genuine structure, real safety standards, and meaningful community connections — regardless of whether those organizations are affiliated with CSL.

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