



SCHOOL OF  
CALISTHENICS®

# BEGINNERS TRAINING GUIDE





## SCHOOL OF CALISTHENICS<sup>®</sup>

**Welcome to the School of Calisthenics, we're excited to have you on board.**

Calisthenics training is a journey packed with excitement, accomplishment and self-discovery.

It's more than just pounding away at the gym on the treadmill or on the bench press. It's about exploring the physical movement potential we all have inside and mentally challenging ourselves to redefine our own impossible.

If you apply what we are going to teach you, train hard with consistency and patience, as your individual journey progresses you are going to achieve some awesome feats of strength and control. Movements like the human flags, handstands, muscle ups and levers might seem a million miles away but that is what the School of Calisthenics was established to teach.

We are confident that we can support anyone to do things they currently believe to be impossible. But getting started is the hardest bit. Rather than watching videos of people doing amazing things, this beginners guide is going to give you the knowledge and tools to build the basic movement patterns and strength, setting the foundations required to redefine your impossible!





WHAT IS CALISTHENICS?



## What is Calisthenics?

Calisthenics is a form of physical training based primarily around mastering your own bodyweight, using minimal equipment. Calisthenics comes from the Greek words 'kallos' and 'sthenos', which mean beauty and strength. When the Greeks saw bodyweight training all those years ago, they named it 'beautiful strength'!

Calisthenics combines strength training and basic gymnastic movements that can be done anywhere; at home, in the park, at the gym or even in the office. It's the most basic form of physical training. The human body is designed to move and that very fact has enabled the human race to successfully survive a multitude of extreme events and challenges throughout our history. But modern society and lifestyles are threatening the very thing that is at the core of our existence. Calisthenics represents a de-volution of training, going back to basics and exploring what amazing things the body is capable of and in the process developing strength we can use in the world, not just within the confines of a gym.

Getting started in Calisthenics however is not easy. Not because it is complicated but simply because most people just don't know how to begin. It looks difficult and might even feel physically impossible. You are going to ask your body to move in ways it may never have done before or at least not for a long time. With something so new and challenging you are going to need some help and guidance to navigate the physical complexity. But now you're part of the School of Calisthenics we are going to help you learn new, seemingly impossible things. However it doesn't end there, we'll also help you to improve your physical fitness, conditioning, wellbeing, nutrition and maybe even change the way you approach the wider challenges you face in life! Calisthenics is not just good for our body it develops mental strength and fortitude as well.

### The School Rules

*Important message  
from the Headmaster*  
↓

**BEFORE YOU BEGIN CALISTHENICS TRAINING [CLICK HERE](#), OR GO TO THE WEB PAGE BELOW TO READ OUR SCHOOL RULES.**

**[WWW.SCHOOLOFCALISTHENICS.COM/SCHOOL-RULES](http://WWW.SCHOOLOFCALISTHENICS.COM/SCHOOL-RULES)**

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THE SCHOOL OF CALISTHENICS

## The School of Calisthenics

The School of Calisthenics was founded in 2016 but our roots go back much farther than that. Our tutors have been working in the field of elite sport and athlete training for many years. They have trained athletes who have won medals at European, Commonwealth, World and Paralympic level. This experience of coaching combined with relevant academic qualifications is what our school is based on and we now want to share all that with you.

Teaching students to achieve new, awesome and often seemingly impossible things through calisthenics is what all our tutors are passionate about. The School of Calisthenics foundations are built upon the principle that when given the right education, coaching and guidance you can achieve awesome things. Things that you might previously have assigned to the 'impossible' box in your brain!

Calisthenics is not impossible; even if it feels like that at the start, don't worry. Our extensive experience in professional sport and elite performance strength and conditioning has enabled us to develop an approach to teaching, which is progressive and systematic. We understand movement, physical adaptation and exercise physiology and the school exists to apply that within the realm of calisthenics. To do that we have created a unique framework which will take you from this beginners guide all the way to human flags, levers, muscle ups, handstands and beyond. We have developed specific frameworks and exercises for each of these movements which can be found on our website [schoolofcalisthenics.com](http://schoolofcalisthenics.com)

We are passionate about calisthenics and even more so about helping anyone begin their journey by removing the barriers which often prevent them from even getting started, let alone becoming awesome.





USING THE BEGINNERS GUIDE  
TO CALISTHENICS

## Using the Beginners Guide to Calisthenics

This guide is designed to give you an insight into the phases of the School of Calisthenics Framework that will help you to build the foundation movements and basic strength needed to start your Calisthenics journey. Once you're ready you can either sign up to one of the School of Calisthenics face to face workshops or set yourself a goal of training towards and achieving awesome things like; human flags, levers, muscle ups and handstand push-ups, with the use of our downloadable Training Programs.

The School of Calisthenics framework is explained briefly in the following pages but for this guide we are going to focus on two of the phases; Movement Preparation and Capacity Strength. The other two components, Movement Patterning and Applied Strength relate to specific Calisthenics movements and the exercises and progressions necessary to achieve them.

In the Training Programme section of this guide you'll find links to exercise videos on our website showing demonstrations and full coaching instruction from our School of Calisthenics tutors.

## The School of Calisthenics Framework

The framework is based on two key physical components: Movement and Strength. We've included an overview below to give a brief explanation of how it works and how to use it, however more details can be found at [www.schoolofcalisthenics.com](http://www.schoolofcalisthenics.com)

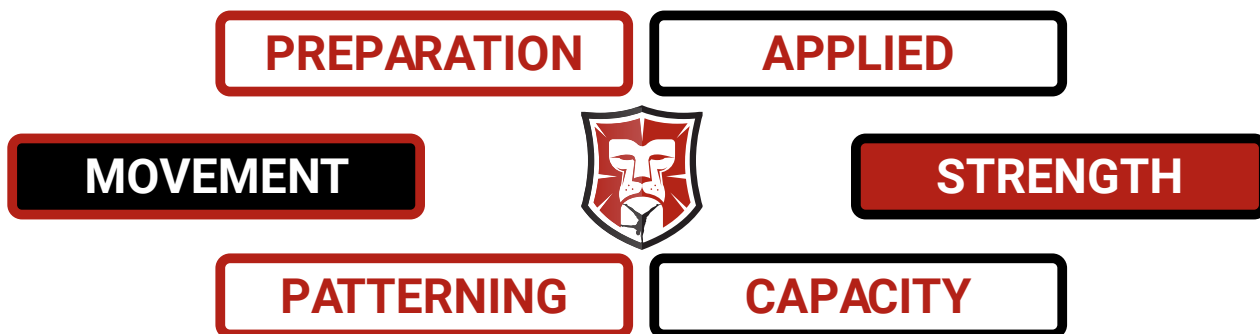


Figure one: The School of Calisthenics Framework





STAGE ONE: MOVEMENT



## STAGE ONE **Movement**

Movement is broken down into two sub-categories; Movement Preparation and Movement Patterning. This is such an important part for all Calisthenics movements as they demand high levels of joint mobility and co-ordinated muscle activation.

### **Movement Preparation**

Many of the calisthenics movements place a large emphasis on the shoulders. Our modern day lifestyles involve extended periods of sitting that often results in less than optimal postural alignment. Shoulders become tight, rounded forwards, the head protrudes and we lose thoracic spine mobility. This is a long way from what position the body should be in and where it needs to be for optimal force production needed in Calisthenics. If we ignore postural dysfunctions, we face an increased injury risk and can expect a limitation on our ability to progress. We must therefore prepare the body for movement. It's an ongoing process but real changes can be achieved in minutes within a session. Our aim is simply to remove muscular tension, improve muscle length, enhance mobility and activate the muscles we intend to use thus preparing us to move. The ultimate aim is to get back to as close to optimum posture as possible.

Movement Preparation is a key element of this beginners guide as poor postural patterns are an epidemic and getting this sorted is the first step on everybody's journey.

### **Movement Patterning**

Movement Patterning is about teaching the brain and body new movements patterns. This is particularly important when working towards a new Calisthenics movement (like a Human Flag or Reverse Lever for example) as your brain and body have never linked the muscles before into the correct movement pattern. However this beginner's guide focuses on building the foundation strength to start your Calisthenics journey, rather than developing specific movement patterns, which will be covered in full detail in each of the specific training programs for the different Calisthenics movements will be available at [www.schoolofcalisthenics.com](http://www.schoolofcalisthenics.com)





STAGE TWO: STRENGTH



## STAGE TWO **Strength**

As with Movement, the Strength component of the School of Calisthenics Framework also has two elements; Applied Strength and Capacity Strength.

### **Applied Strength**

Applied strength is specific to a chosen calisthenics movement. For example, to do a reverse lever or a human flag for the first time means putting your body in a position it has never been before and applying high levels of muscle force in that shape. That takes some programming through the movement patterning but also by using progressive exercises that allow the body to build the strength required. These exercises are specific to the goal or calisthenics movement and therefore this phase of the framework will be covered in more detail in future training programs designed for each specific calisthenics movements published on our website [www.schoolofcalisthenics.com](http://www.schoolofcalisthenics.com)

### **Capacity Strength**

For beginners this phase of the School of Calisthenics Framework is where the bulk of your training will be done. Building a basic level of strength in a number of key areas will set you up perfectly to chose your first calisthenics movement goal and begin your journey. It's really important that you remember this key phrase; 'earn the right to progress'. Often we see people jumping to more advanced movements without mastering the basics or relevant progressions. They want to go straight to level 5 without really completing levels 2 to 4. Inevitably in all cases the athlete has to come back to go through the stages properly if they are to achieve longer term success.

The exercises in this phase are less specific, global strength exercises that will help build strength, however we can also develop neuromuscular control, postural stability, robustness and muscular co-ordination which are all essential in calisthenics movements. For example you can do push-ups without thinking about it, or you can do push-ups with some coaching points from our tutors and get loads more physical adaptation which will transfer into your future training.





# THE TRAINING PROGRAMME



## The Training Programme

By now we hope that you are itching to get started so let's introduce the exercises. Following the next section there is some information about reps, sets, tempo, rest and how to structure sessions so make sure you read that too as it's really important in ensuring you get the physical adaptation you're after.

The exercises we have included for you as part of this beginners guide are not just for people getting started, we still do these exercises ourselves. The development and progression of basic strength is essential and something that always needs developing.

### Movement Preparation Exercises:

These selected exercises introduce some simple methods you can use to improve the range of movement around the shoulder and restore more optimal activation patterns. The shoulder is a joint on which we inflict a lot of stress in day to day life due to poor postural control and modern lifestyles. It has a great capacity for movement but at the expense of stability so you need to look after it.

#### Self Massage: Lats and posterior shoulder (Watch the video)

A lot of muscular tension accumulates around the muscles acting on the shoulders and to restore range of motion and movement quality we need to release it. Try this for 1 – 2 minutes on each arm at the start of your session.

#### Mobilisation: Hanging Lat Stretch (Watch the video)

Once some tension has been released you can further enhance the mobility of the shoulder joint using this simple exercise. Hang out in this position adjusting the shape gently to find the tight areas for around 1 minute on each arm .

#### Activation: Floor Y T W (Watch the video)

To get ready for training, muscles need switching on and waking up. Following the self-massage and mobilization exercises we complete movement preparation by telling the brain to activate certain muscles, which improves postural control and movement quality. Developing strength and activation in the mid and lower trapezius is something you will always need to do.

**Reps:** 10 (a complete sequence of 1 x Y T W equals 1 rep)  
**Sets:** 2  
**Tempo:** Pause for 2 seconds in each position





CAPACITY STRENGTH EXERCISES





# SECTION ONE: PUSH EXERCISES





## SECTION ONE Push Exercises

### **Push-up variations**

There is so much more to push ups than the standard variation most people know. Firstly a lot of people don't do them with correct technique and that is always the priority. Secondly there are loads of progressions that make this a really challenging movement. We have included a few to get you started.

### **Standard Push Up (Watch the video)**

Everyone knows how to do a push up right? Wrong. Correct arm positioning and postural control is essential in maximizing strength gains.

### **Push Up Plus (Watch the video)**

Repetitive strain and injury to the muscular shoulder is common so taking proactive steps to make it bombproof is an excellent investment of your training time. This is a specific push up variation that targets the serratus anterior muscle, which plays an important role in controlling shoulder stability and correct movement of the shoulder blade (scapula).

### **Planche Push Ups (Watch the video)**

A slight change in the hand position will make this much more challenging and help to build the foundations for hand balancing skills and the bottom hand of the human flag.

### **Pike Push Ups (Watch the video)**

Elevating the feet and hips changes the angle of the movement and shifts the stress onto the shoulders and upper portions of the chest. If you want to get from a frog stand to a free standing handstand you are going to need some of this strength in your locker.

### **Dips (Watch the video)**

A bodyweight classic that builds strength in the chest, shoulders and triceps but also has a few technique points that people often get wrong. This move is essential in so many movements but particularly the muscle up.

### **Frog Stand (Watch the video)**

The Frog Stand is your first step on your hand balancing journey and an important part of your handstand progression. This is also a great exercise to build shoulder stability, which applies to other calisthenics movements such as muscle ups, flags and levers.





SECTION TWO: PULL EXERCISES





## SECTION TWO Pull Exercises

### **Active Hang** (Watch the video)

This exercise doesn't look like much but it is the very foundation on which many calisthenics movements begin. Proper scapula setting and activation of the active hang provides a strong position to start any pulling exercise.

### **Pull Ups** (Watch the video)

If you're going to get anywhere with your calisthenics training you're going to need the strength to perform a decent number of bodyweight pull-ups. Strength in this movement applies directly to the muscle up but also the top hand pulling action in the human flag.

### **Skin The Cat** (Watch the video)

The first step to performing a reverse lever is to skin the cat. We have no idea why it is called this unless cats were once skinned by someone suspended in the air and spinning upside down! This requires a good active hang to get started.

### **Bodyweight Ring Row** (Watch the video)

This exercise looks like it should be easy but performed properly it can be very challenging. It's also an important player in addressing muscle balance to correct poor shoulder posture. We all need to do more pulling movements in this position. The bodyweight row will teach you how to control shoulder position and the pulling action whilst integrating core and glute activation, which transfers to the strength required for levers and handstands.





## SECTION THREE: CORE EXERCISES

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## SECTION THREE Core Exercises

Calisthenics places a huge demand on the core, and by that we mean all the muscles that attach to the spine or hips. Core is a lot more than a six pack and something that will require continued development as your quest for more advanced movements progresses. Whilst there is some specific transfer to certain movements you're going to use your core in calisthenics movement. It was always designed to work like that, in complete harmony with human movement, not just to do crunches!

### **Deadbug** (Watch the video)

A simple exercise that can be easily progressed to help build the postural control and activation patterns in the mid section and create the basis for more advanced exercises. Get this right first and everything will make more sense.

### **The Plank** (Watch the video)

Probably the most poorly coached and performed exercise going. There is a lot more to the plank than you might be aware. Done properly it develops stability of the mid section by enhancing core and glute strength and synchronization, which is essential in calisthenics. Performed incorrectly it develops back pain!

### **Walkouts / Ring Rollouts** (Watch the video)

Crawling movements are not only good for core and glute activation but also the shoulders. Developing stability in the core and integrating it with the shoulder joint will serve you much better in calisthenics than any form of crunch exercise. You'll need this strength in handstands, levers and human flags.

### **Leg Lowerers** (Watch the video)

Being able to control your hip and spine position when the demand is being applied by the lower body is really important to mastering moves such as the dragon flag and front lever. Start with these ensuring your technique is perfect.





PLANNING YOUR TRAINING



## **Planning Your Training**

So now you have all the tools required for your first calisthenics session, but which exercises do you use? How many should you do? How many reps and sets of each exercise should you do? How much rest should you take? We call these the acute variables and they are an important part of creating physical adaptation. You need to know however that designing training programmes is not an exact science, there is a lot of art involved. To get you started we have provided some suggestions but a big focus of the School of Calisthenics is to provide the education so you can make informed decisions about exercise selection yourself. Keep your eyes on the website for more information.

## **Which and how many exercises in a session**

This really depends on what level you are currently at and your training background so we encourage you to consider this before just trying to do them all. We'd suggest doing Movement Preparation at the start of every session and then selecting between 3 to 6 other exercises. Sessions can be specifically working towards pushing, pulling, core or a combination of 2 or all 3 areas so select from the sections accordingly. We have included some example sessions in the following pages for you.

If you trained just once per week we'd recommend that you do a combined session of push, pull and core. If you can do 2 sessions a week you can separate your push and pull exercises onto different days but build in some core on both. Similarly if you do 3 sessions per week you could do the same but add a combined session in as well. Alternatively you could do 3 combined sessions per week, rotating the actual push, pull or core exercises between sessions.

## **Reps, Sets & Rest**

Capacity strength is all about building up your strength endurance. This means you should be looking to achieve at least 8 to 12 reps of an exercise. The number one priority however is that you do as many reps as you can with perfect technique. Performing reps without proper control or form leads to injury and limits your progress. Quality before quantity!

The volume you can achieve in a session or training week will increase as your training progresses so building up your reps and sets is part of the journey. It maybe that the first time you try an exercise you only complete 3 reps, that's fine! Through consistent training you will get stronger and can build towards increasing that number. Your only competition at this stage is yourself so focus on what you can do.



Rest will be dictated by how difficult you find each of the exercises, but when trying to build up our strength endurance with capacity exercises we should be looking to rest for only 60 seconds between sets and exercises.

### **How many times per week?**

Rest is an extremely important aspect and it is when you are not training that the actual physical adaptation within the muscle and connective tissue takes place. If you don't rest between sessions you will soon see a plateau in your progress. Try to plan and have a rest day in between sessions. Therefore you could build up to training 3 or 4 times a week, allowing for a days rest between training days. However depending on your starting point and training background it maybe that you simply start with 1 session per week and build up towards 2 or 3 sessions eventually.

Calisthenics is demanding on your whole body every session. You are not isolating particular muscle groups so you can't expect to train your whole body on consecutive days repeatedly, you just simply won't recover!





## Example Training Sessions

### **Push session**

Warm up using the Movement Preparation Exercises

Choose 3 or 4 Capacity Strength Push exercises

Complete 8 to 12 reps of each exercise in a circuit, with only 60 seconds rest between each exercise. Complete 2 to 4 laps of the circuit.

### **Pull session**

Warm up using the Movement Preparation Exercises

Choose 3 or 4 Capacity Strength Pull exercises

Complete 8 to 12 reps of each exercise in a circuit, with only 60 seconds rest between each exercise. Complete 2 to 4 laps of the circuit.

Complete 8 to 12 reps of each exercise in a circuit, with only 60 seconds rest between each exercise. Complete 2 to 4 laps of the circuit.

### **Core session**

Warm up using the Movement Preparation Exercises

Choose 3 or 4 Capacity Strength Core exercises

Complete 8 to 12 reps of each exercise in a circuit, with only 60 seconds rest between each exercise. Complete 2 to 4 laps of the circuit.

### **Combined**

Warm up using the Movement Preparation Exercises

Choose 1 or 2 Capacity Strength Push exercises

Choose 1 or 2 Capacity Strength Pull exercises

Choose 1 or 2 Capacity Strength Core exercises



REDEFINE YOUR OWN  
"IMPOSSIBLE"

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Awesome Images shot by Victory Visuals

Legend  
↙