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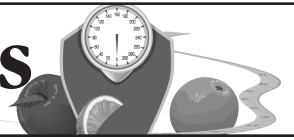
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Health & Fitness



Strength training is appropriate for young people, with proper guidance

By Wayne Matus

In recent years, there has been much discussion as to whether strength training is safe for preadolescents or adolescents. Some common misconceptions is that strength training will cause injuries and stunt the growth of children. As long as there is proper guidance, there is no evidence to show that proper strength training will have an adverse effect on preadolescents. Most strength training related injuries are a result of improper technique or little or no supervision.

Many kids participate in sports starting out as young as 5 or 6. As they grow into the adolescent years, youths are participating in multiple sports every season, competing in their respective sport almost daily. Too often this leads to injuries resulting from many things, such as overuse, or lack of physical conditioning. To help prevent injury it is recommended that young athletes prepare their bodies for not only athletics but everyday life. It's no secret that various types of exercise will also increase ones overall health. This can be habit forming, thus carrying over into adulthood.

Children can increase bone density and muscular strength from resistance exercises. To get set up on a proper strength training program, a qualified personal trainer can be of great help.

Although it is recommended that youths get involved in resistance training, there are do's and don'ts that need to be adhered to.

Some simple resistance exercises using one's own body weight, such as performing push-ups or pull-ups, are great exercises for increasing upper body strength. Abdominal crunches paired with a back extension will increase strength in the abdominal and lower back region. And for the lower body, squats and lunges are great exercises that recruit muscle fibers from multiple muscle groups. By performing these few exercises, virtually all muscle groups are used — pushing, pulling, as well as upper, lower and middle body parts.

It is worth noting that strength gains in preadolescent athletes are due not because of muscle hypertrophy, but neural adaptations. But when training is discontinued, strength gains drop dramati-

cally. When designing a strength training program, it is important to include all muscle groups for a total body workout. This will prevent muscle imbalances, which may otherwise result in injury.

Practicing proper form and technique is very important. The No. 1 reason any athlete trains is to prevent injury, so it is very important to have a qualified personal trainer or strength coach demonstrate these exercises to ensure proper form. Once proper form has been established and the child demonstrates a level of maturity that will enable him or her to exercise safely, then it is OK to begin to add some additional exercises along with light dumbbells or machines. To perfect proper technique there are some things that the young athlete must keep in mind. For example, always perform strength exercises in slow and controlled movements. Never use weights that are too heavy. If an exercise cannot be performed with proper technique, then it's likely that too much weight is being used. Never lock the joints while strength training. At the beginner level, always keep your back supported while learning various lifting techniques. Once the lower back has strengthened and proper form has been achieved, it is beneficial to stand freely while performing some single joint exercises, such as side lateral raises or front shoulder raises, just to name a few. When performing these exercises, hold the abdominals tight, contracting them isometrically. This will not only strengthen and stabilize the midsection but will also improve posture.

Keep in mind, while youths are still growing, their epiphyseal (growth) plates can be damaged if strength training exercises are performed improperly.

Other exercises that should be avoided for anyone under the age of 18 are Olympic-style lifts or power movements. These lifts involve highly skilled movements that take years for elite athletes to perfect. With some creativity and advice from a qualified professional, there are always exercises that can be substituted for one another while still achieving the same results.

Wayne Matus is owner of Fitness Together in Freehold. Visit www.ffreehold.com or e-mail him at waynematus@fitnesstogether.com.

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