

Strength Training for Kids: A Guide for Parents and Teachers

Many parents and physical education teachers have traditionally shied away from strength training with their children or students. However, there is sufficient research to suggest that strength training is a suitable—and safe—option for most youth.

Correcting the Misconceptions

There are a number of common myths about [youth strength training](#) that continue to cause concern among parents and educators. Two of the most common misconceptions are that strength training may stunt the growth of children and that children should not lift weights until they are 12 years old. There is simply no evidence to support either of these statements. In fact, all of the major fitness and medical organizations in the U.S. recommend strength training for youth, assuming that basic guidelines are adhered to and that appropriate leadership is present. And about the question of age, children can begin to train with weights as soon as they are able to accept and follow directions—usually around the age of seven or eight.



The Benefits

The benefits of youth strength training are similar to those for adults, though the importance of getting an early start cannot be overemphasized—the most important benefit of any youth fitness program is an improved attitude about lifelong activity. Improvements in muscular fitness, bone mineral density, body composition, motor fitness performance and injury resistance should be compelling evidence for all parents, though children will likely focus on things like enhanced sports performance and the social aspects of exercise. In fact, children don't usually have the ability to comprehend long-term concepts until the ages of 11 to 14, so abstract ideas like healthy bones and disease prevention will do little to motivate them, and may in fact de-motivate some children. Stick with ideas like self-improvement and individual success, and always make sure everyone is having fun. Fun is the number one motivator in almost every aspect of a child's life.

Another compelling argument for youth strength-training programs is that significant improvements have been seen in the self-esteem, mental discipline and socialization of children who participate. Think back to your days in P.E. What games did you play? What types of physical attributes and skills were most often rewarded with success? Most likely, you are thinking of team games that featured speed, agility, jumping ability and overall athleticism. And those things should be rewarded!

But a glaring omission in that list is muscular strength, and it is often overweight and obese children who will excel in that area. Weight training provides an opportunity to let children who typically struggle with group activities stand out from their classmates and perform well on an individual basis. What a tremendous way to boost self-esteem in the children who need it most.

How to Get Your Kids Started

It is important that parents and teachers do not impose training techniques and philosophies on children just because they may have worked for their own routines. Listen very closely to kids' concerns and address them with care. Instructor attitude is of the utmost importance when working with kids. Start slowly and lean toward underestimating rather than overestimating the strength of young exercisers. Not only is it safer to do so, but it also leaves plenty of room for progress—and tangible progress is essential in the early stages of a youth strength-training program. The initial focus should be on developing good form and learning the basics of strength training.

Introduce children to a variety of exercises and types of resistance. Most kids love to learn new things, so working with [medicine balls and resistance tubing](#) in addition to the more traditional free weights and machines is a great idea—and a much more affordable one. Just be sure that all the major muscle groups are addressed in a balanced, full-body workout.

Finally, remember that your goals when exercising with children are simple: Be safe, have fun and help kids learn to love physical activity.

What Every Fitness Professional Should Know About Designing Exercise Programs for Kids

There is no doubt about it—kids need to exercise to stay healthy and grow strong. Children who engage regularly in physical activity tend to do better in school, and a growing body of evidence suggests that health-related behaviors acquired during childhood and adolescence are more likely to be continued into adulthood. Therefore, a youngster who enjoys physical activity and learns how to live a physically active life is more likely to become an active adult.

Given the dramatic cutbacks in school-based physical education programs, many parents are turning to fitness professionals to help their kids get the recommended amount of exercise. Yet unlike adults, most kids are not interested in organized or supervised exercise programs, and research suggests that the recommended exercise protocol for getting adults in shape is not particularly effective or enjoyable for preadolescents. Children prefer activities that are typically considered free play or are organized like games. So rather than focus entirely on fitness skills and sports performance, youth programs should be geared toward fostering lifelong physical activity habits. **When planning an exercise program for children, always keep the fun factor high** and consider the following guidelines for teaching and motivating children to exercise:

- 1. Outline clear training objectives.** If you are organizing a regular routine workout with children, set clear training objectives in a simple-to-understand manner. Provide a copy of these guidelines for their parents as well.
- 2. Use concise instruction with precise demonstration.** Show and tell is a simple but effective way to communicate how to perform an exercise.
- 3. Provide attentive supervision.** Many children lack confidence in their exercise abilities and need extra attention and encouragement. Never step out of the room or divert your attention while kids are exercising.
- 4. Provide appropriate assistance.** Strength training is often difficult for young exercisers. Provide a little manual assistance to guide them to a successful exercise experience.
- 5. Perform one task at a time.** Give children only one task at a time to ensure they do not become confused. This increases the probability they will progress successfully through the exercise session.
- 6. Gradually progress.** Take small steps with young exercisers. Do not introduce a new task until the first one is mastered. Better to have young exercisers learn the correct way to exercise than to un-learn the wrong way.
- 7. Provide lots of positive reinforcement.** Increase a child's self-confidence and satisfaction with exercise by giving them encouraging comments, personal compliments or a pat on the shoulder. Telling children they are doing a good job is one of the best ways to keep them doing a good job.
- 8. Offer specific feedback.** Positive reinforcement is much more meaningful when delivered with specific feedback. Giving a reason for your comment increases the value of the statement.
- 9. Word questions carefully.** Children may be reluctant to offer information that could be useful in selecting the right exercises. Try to ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer.
- 10. Keep the lines of communication open.** Spend some time before and after an exercise session in an enthusiastic conversation with the children. It will give you insight into what makes them tick.