

Strength Training for Kids

Do you want your kids to grow strong muscles and bones, shed fat and build self-confidence? Are you looking for an activity that will excite an overweight child about the joys of exercise? Strength training could be the solution. Here are answers to commonly asked questions about youth strength training from two experts in the subject: Wayne L. Westcott, PhD, fitness research director at the South Shore YMCA in Quincy, Massachusetts, and an advisor to Nautilus Health & Fitness Group; and Avery D. Faigenbaum, EdD, associate professor of exercise science and physical education at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

Why Should Kids Strength Train?

Children like to alternate between brief periods of high-effort movement and longer periods of rest—and strength training lets them do that. Strength training also provides visual reinforcement. Young exercisers can easily see how much weight they are lifting and how much progress they have made. The many benefits of strength training include stronger muscles, bones, tendons and ligaments; more muscle mass; less fat; a higher metabolism; greater physical capacity; and increased self-confidence.

Do you have an overweight child? One of the best features of youth strength training is the success rate that overweight boys and girls experience with it. In most athletic activities—running, jumping, soccer and basketball, for example—extra body weight is undesirable. By contrast, strength training actually favors larger children and gives them a much-needed sense of physical accomplishment. Because the amount of weight lifted is positively related to body weight, heavier kids can usually train with heavier amounts than their lighter peers.

TRAINING GUIDELINES AT A GLANCE

Although strength training recommendations for adults and children are similar in many ways, there are differences, especially when it comes to sets and repetitions. Use the following information as a general guideline. For a specific program, seek the help of a qualified fitness instructor or personal trainer.

Sets: one challenging set of each exercise, which may or may not be preceded by one or two preliminary sets

Repetitions: 10 to 15 repetitions in each exercise set

Frequency: 20-minute training session performed on 2 or 3 nonconsecutive days each week

Progression: a weight increase of 5 percent or less (typically 1 to 5 pounds) once a child can complete 15 repetitions with a given amount of weight

Speed: 2 seconds for lifting movements and 2 seconds for lowering movements

Range: full movement range on simple, single-joint exercises like leg extensions; moderate movement range on complex, multijoint exercises like leg presses

Breathing: exhaling during lifting movements, and inhaling during lowering movements

Posture: standing or sitting tall with head up, shoulders square, torso erect and hips level; avoiding twisting, turning and squirming

Is Strength Training Safe for Kids?

Many people mistakenly believe that strength training is an unsafe activity for kids. In fact, no serious injury has ever been reported in any prospective study on youth strength training. Not only is it safe for kids; it may actually help *reduce the number of injuries* they get during other physical activities. Westcott and Faigenbaum have conducted regular strength training classes for children 6 to 12 years old for the past 18 years—and not one of the kids has been injured.

What Exercises Should Kids Do?

Westcott and Faigenbaum recommend that preadolescents perform six to 12 different strength exercises each training session. The program should address all the major muscle groups, and kids should progress from the larger muscle groups to the smaller ones, in the same way adults do. Kids can improve strength whether

they use free weights (dumbbells) or resistance machines (either youth-sized or adult-sized).

For more information, see *Strength and Power for Young Athletes* by Faigenbaum and Westcott (Human Kinetics 2000) or consult with a personal trainer who specializes in kids' strength training. ♦

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