

Kids can weight train safely with supervision

A close friend and client asked me at what age her son should begin resistance training. A great deal of misunderstanding surrounds strength training for young athletes.

The general consensus among researchers is that children can begin weight training at age 12 or 13. Many researchers agree that pre-adolescent children (before puberty) can begin training if they are mature enough to accept coaching. They must be ready to listen and follow instructions and understand the concept of improving as opposed to pleasing.

Research shows that kids begin organized sports around the age of 5 (give or take a few years). Soccer is a good example, as well our home sport here in Jackson

– skiing. How many parents involve their child in a ski lesson before age 6? Yet most parents would not even think of placing their sons and daughters in a resistance-training program at that age.

Christopher M. Proulx of Hesser College, who serves as the program coordinator of health and fitness and an associate professor, says it is very common to see community soccer leagues, with children from 5 years of age playing. Toy companies make roller and in-line skates that would fit 3-year-olds. I believe age should be

an individual concern and/or desire. It is obvious that 3- and 4-year-olds have the ability to perform motor skill acquisition. I believe children are capable of learning resistance training techniques if they are not forced into it and have proper instruction and supervision.

Resistance training does not stunt children's growth. It does not directly cause growth defects. It is the improper guidance of instructors providing improper techniques in the exercises and excessive loading that causes injury to the epiphyseal plate (growth plate). As a result, there are five publications that report epiphyseal plate fractures attributed to weightlifting in preadolescents. Therefore, it is not long before "Resistance train-

ing stunts children's growth" becomes a headline.

Ever wonder why adolescents sprout in the summer? If you think about it, a young athlete or nonathlete goes through the school year with improper nutrition and lack of sleep – not listening to parents – emotional stress (taking tests, boy/girlfriend breakups, etc.) and continuous sports throughout the year. In the summer, those tend to subside and the maturation of growth catches up. Research shows that as long as your child has physical and emotional rest, he/she

will catch up in the natural maturation of his/her growth.

Olympic weightlifting team assistant coach Mark Rippetoe, out of Texas, makes a general but strong statement: The risk of epiphyseal injury has been grossly exaggerated by the medical community and has been used for years as an excuse to recommend against resistance training for youth populations. This same medical community seldom recommends against young people playing organized sports such as soccer, football, and basketball, activities that generate a sizable portion of an orthopedic surgeon's practice. Epiphyseal injuries are virtually unknown within the context of correct lifting techniques.

What are the benefits of resistance training programs in young athletes?

The obvious answer is strength development. The advantages resistance training has shown on preadolescents tend to side with neuromuscular adaptations. Although hormone response is largely absent in preadolescents, research shows increases in strength. Another advantage is positive self-esteem due to a sense of accomplishment. Resistance training may also translate into improved proprioception (knowing where your arm is in space) and reaction time.

Avery D. Faigenbaum, an associate professor in the department of exercise science and physical education at the University of Massachusetts, says the data suggests that regular participation in a youth resistance-

training program may have a positive influence on motor performance skills (sprint speed and jumping ability), body composition, bone mineral density, and selected psychosocial parameters. Furthermore, because the musculoskeletal system of aspiring young athletes may be ill-prepared to handle the duration and magnitude of forces that develop during practice and game situations, resistance training may be able to decrease the risk of sports-related injuries.

If you think your child is ready, consider these questions: Does your young athlete want to participate in a resistance-training program? How much emphasis does the instructor put on technique and hydration? Does the instructor have his athletes perform calisthenics and stretching exercises before and after every resistance training session? Is the instructor-to-student ratio lower than 1 to 10?

A good beginning weight training session is a set of six to eight exercises for 10 to 15 repetitions. The exercises should focus on the major muscles of the upper and lower body, and then progress gradually. Ask to sit in a session to observe how the instructor treats children with respect and speaks to them in a language that they can understand.

Augustine (Augie) Hernandez Jr. owns Training to Be Balanced LLC. He is a movement specialist in most sports. Reach him at augie@t2bb.net or www.trainingtobebalanced.net.



Training to be balanced

Augie Hernandez