

When to Begin?

by Jim McCrossin ATC / CSCS

When can my child begin weight training? This question has been frequently asked and fiercely debated among coaches, parents and children. Before we go any further, let's clarify the difference between weight training and weight lifting.

Weight training/Strength training/Resistance training, is a method of conditioning that uses resistance to increase muscular strength by various methods including free weights or dumbbells, weight machines and resistance bands.

Weight lifting consists of two unique, complex lifts called the snatch and the clean and jerk. Weight lifting involves ballistic, explosive maneuvers using a barbell, which is lifted, from the ground to the overhead position.

What are the health and safety concerns of weight training in children? Most of the controversy over weight training in children concerns damage to the growing child's growth plates resulting in "stunted growth." The American College of Sports Medicine cited a recent study involving 1,109 children and adolescent weight lifters who competed at national meets over a four-year period. The study revealed that there were no growth plate injuries or serious injuries requiring hospitalization or surgery. Minor injuries such as muscle strains were common but not more so than in weight lifting adults. Severe injury, disability or even death are rare but have been reported. In almost all cases, these incidents occurred when appropriate adult supervision, instruction and technique were lacking. Weight training, as defined above, is far less aggressive than weight lifting and it would follow that the potential for injury would be far less. Studies comparing weight training to activities such as soccer, basketball and football, showed a significantly lower number of injuries in weight training. At this time, there is no scientific evidence that early strength training can "stunt" a child's growth.

What are the benefits of a properly supervised strength-training program? Strength training is believed to promote a healthy lifestyle and build self-confidence in children and adolescents. Strength training has been shown to improve coordination by improving motor skills and sports perform-



ance. In younger children, most of the strength gains are from improved technique, muscle fiber recruitment and coordination as opposed to muscle growth. Nation wide, childhood obesity is on the rise. Strength training has been shown to improve body composition by increasing lean body mass. Studies have shown that children and adolescents who are involved in a strength-training program have an improved cholesterol level, better cardio-respiratory fitness, increased bone health and a very positive self-image. Sports related injuries are also significantly lower in children who take part in a regular resistance program.

So, there are some of the facts and here is my advice. If your child would like to start some type of strength training program, dynamite! The benefits appear to far outweigh any potential risks when performed properly and appropriately, but just as with anybody who is beginning an exercise program, consult your physician first. Have your child's pediatrician perform a complete physical and seek his or her advice as to whether or not a weight training program is appropriate for your child. Make sure that the program your child participates in is properly and constantly supervised by an individual who is certified in the field of strength training. But, most importantly, be sure that your child is having FUN!



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