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FITNESS

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Strength training: OK for kids when done correctly

Strength training offers kids many benefits, but there are important caveats to keep in mind. Here's what you need to know about youth strength training.

Strength training for kids? You bet! Done properly, strength training offers many bonuses to young athletes. Strength training is even a good idea for kids who simply want to look and feel better. In fact, strength training can put your child on a lifetime path to better health and fitness.

Strength training, not weightlifting

For kids, light resistance and controlled movements are best — with a special emphasis on proper technique and safety. Your child can do many strength training exercises with his or her own body weight or inexpensive resistance tubing. Free weights and machine weights are other options.

Don't confuse strength training with weightlifting, bodybuilding or powerlifting. These activities are largely driven by competition, with participants vying to lift heavier weights or build bigger muscles than those of other athletes. This can put too much strain on young muscles, tendons and areas of cartilage that haven't yet turned to bone (growth plates) — especially when proper technique is sacrificed in favor of lifting larger amounts of weight.

For kids, what are the benefits of strength training?

Done properly, strength training can:

- Increase your child's muscle strength and endurance
- Help protect your child's muscles and joints from injury
- Improve your child's performance in nearly any sport, from dancing and figure skating to football and soccer

And strength training isn't only for athletes. Even if your child isn't interested in sports, strength training can:

- Strengthen your child's bones
- Help promote healthy blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- Boost your child's metabolism
- Help your child maintain a healthy weight
- Improve your child's self-esteem

When can a child begin strength training?

During childhood, kids improve their body awareness, control and balance through active play. As early as age 8, however, strength training can become a valuable part of an overall fitness plan — as long as the child is mature enough to follow directions and practice proper technique and form.

If your child expresses an interest in strength training, remind him or her that strength training is meant to increase muscle strength and endurance. Bulking up is something else entirely — and most safely done after puberty.

What's the best way to start a strength training program for kids?

A child's strength training program isn't necessarily a scaled-down version of what an adult would do. Keep these general principles in mind:

- **Seek instruction.** Start with a coach or personal trainer who has experience with youth strength training. The coach or trainer can create a safe, effective strength training program based on your child's age, size, skills and sports interests. Or enroll your child in a strength training class designed for kids.
- **Warm up.** Encourage your child to begin each strength training session with five to 10 minutes of light aerobic activity, such as walking, jogging in place or jumping rope. This warms the muscles and helps reduce the risk of injury. Gentle stretches after each

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and helps reduce the risk of injury. Stretching properly after each session is a good idea, too.

- **Keep it light.** Kids can safely lift adult-size weights, as long as the weight is light enough. In most cases, one set of 12 to 15 repetitions is all it takes. The resistance doesn't have to come from weights, either. Resistance tubing and body-weight exercises, such as push-ups, can be just as effective.
- **Stress proper technique.** Rather than focusing on the amount of weight your child lifts, stress proper form and technique during each exercise. Your child can gradually increase the resistance or number of repetitions as he or she gets older.
- **Supervise.** Adult supervision is an important part of youth strength training. If your child lifts weights, act as a spotter — someone who stands ready to grab the weights — in case the weight becomes too heavy.
- **Rest between workouts.** Make sure your child rests at least one full day between exercising each specific muscle group. Two or three strength training sessions a week are plenty.
- **Keep it fun.** Help your child vary the routine to prevent boredom.

Results won't come overnight. But eventually, your child will notice a difference in muscle strength and endurance — which may fuel a fitness habit that lasts a lifetime.

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