Youth Strength Training: Top 5 Myths

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While children and adolescents have traditionally been encouraged to participate in aerobic activities such as swimming and bicycling, a compelling body of evidence indicates that strength training can be a safe and effective method of exercise for youth provided that appropriate guidelines are followed. The qualified acceptance of youth strength training by medical and fitness organizations such as the American College of Sports Medicine, the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology and the National Strength and Conditioning Association is becoming universal, and nowadays comprehensive school-based programs are specifically designed to enhanced health-related fitness components, which include muscular strength and muscular endurance.

By definition, the term strength training refers to a specialized method of physical conditioning that involves the progressive use of a wide range of resistive loads and a variety of training modalities designed to enhance or maintain muscular fitness. Although it is commonplace for boys and girls to strength train in schools, recreation centers and sports camps to enhance their health, fitness and athletic performance, concerns about the safety and efficacy of youth strength training still persist. Furthermore, coaches, teachers and parents are often asked if the potential benefits of youth resistance training outweigh the risks. Unfortunately, the correct answers to

these questions are often obscured by the myths surrounding strength exercise. Five of the most common myths associated with youth strength training are discussed below:

Myth #1: Strength training will stunt the growth of children.

Fact: Current observations indicate no evidence of a decrease in stature in children who regularly perform resistance exercise in a controlled environment. Furthermore, a growth plate fracture has not been reported in any youth strength training study. If appropriate exercise guidelines are followed, regular participation in weight-bearing physical activities, such as strength exercise, will likely have a favorable influence on bone growth and development during childhood and adolescence.

Myth #2: Strength training is unsafe for children

Fact: With appropriate supervision and instruction, the risks associated with youth strength training are not greater than other activities in which children and adolescents regularly participate. The key is to provide qualified supervision, age-specific instruction and a safe training environment in order to reduce the risk of an accident.

Myth #3: Children can not increase strength because they do not have enough testosterone.

Fact: Testosterone is not essential for achieving strength gains. This is evidenced by women and elderly individuals who experience impressive strength gains without high levels of testosterone. When training-induced strength gains are compared on a relative or percent basis, improvements in children are comparable to adolescents and adults.

Myth #4: Strength training is only for young athletes.

Fact: Although strength training may enhance the sports performance of young athletes while reducing their risk of sports-related injuries, regular participation in a strength training program may also offer observable health value to boys and girls who are not involved in sports programs. In addition to enhancing musculoskeletal health, regular strength training provides an opportunity for participants to learn about their bodies and feel good about participating in strength-building activities that are engaging, progressive and fun. Strength training may be particularly beneficial for overweight youth who are less willing and often unable to participate in prolonged periods of moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise without rest.

Myth #5: The sport of weightlifting is inappropriate for children

Fact: In the sport of weightlifting, athletes attempt to lift maximal amounts of weight when performing the clean and jerk and snatch. Current findings suggest that youth can successfully perform these lifts and benefit from participating in this sport provided that the focus remains on proper form and technique and appropriate weights are used in practice and competition. Children and adolescents who want to participant in weightlifting should be encouraged to do so under the qualified supervision of a youth weightlifting coach.

Selected References

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