

Youth Weight Training: When is it time to start?

BY: J. Thom

Over the years I have been asked by many parents when their kids should or can start working out. Much debate has revolved around what age to start young athletes on a strength-training program. While I am no fitness guru, I have been weight lifting and training on and off since I was 14. Over the years I have helped create weight programs for kids as young as 12, and grown men as old as 50. Each athlete is built differently, so each kid should be looked at on an individual basis. But as a rule of thumb, I tell most parents that I personally feel kids do not need weight lifting until they are in Junior High. Some people may feel that's a little late to start lifting in this ultra-competitive world we live in, so I will share my reasoning.

Weight training is serious business. Lifting weights can build you up, or if done incorrectly, tear you down. Improper lifting can negatively affect muscles, joints, bones, and even nerves. That being said, I feel most kids under 12 years old should not be lifting weights, but they can certainly begin some types of training or workout.

If a younger kid is in a sport of any kind, chances are there are stretches and exercises that enhance the muscles or motions that are key to that sport. In wrestling, we use our whole body, so it is important to stretch and exercise every part. The stretching sessions and the practices themselves can be looked at by some people as a type of workout, which in essence is true. Any type of physical exertion that is done consistently and properly could be deemed a workout for a young athlete. But most parents want to know what kind of training they can do at home, or outside of our practices. The truth is, you could create a workout for your son right in your own living room, much like the way many adults exercise today in front of the TV. Young kids do not need dumbbells or fancy straps to get a workout, just their own resistance created by the weight of their body. There are many, many exercises and workouts that could be tailored for younger athletes, they just involve their own body weight.

What age is it safe to begin any kind of training for any sport? Again, I am no doctor, but I think if they are in an actual sport, or are getting ready

to do a sport, they can begin working out. When my own son was four years old, and began taking an active interest in wrestling and the various activities that go with it, I slowly began to introduce a few wrestling moves, stretches, and exercises to help prepare him, right in our living room. He was a shy little guy and didn't like the big groups, and so he did not start wrestling with the Club until he was 6. But he still wanted to be everywhere dad was and mimic what my older wrestlers were doing. Just by taking him with me to a lot of the practices, open mat, private lessons, and weight room sessions, his own curious nature of seeing what I had the older kids doing had created an interest. I allow him to do what he is comfortable doing, and after stressing the importance of form (for his push ups, pull-ups, wrestling drills, etc.) I make sure he wants to actually do it, and that he still thinks its fun and cool. Parents still have to keep things kid-centered, so that they will want to work out and train later in life.

So what do I suggest people focus on? Essentially, being able to do good push-ups, sits-ups, lunges, leg lifts, and pull-ups/chin-ups is the best way to build up a young persons body, from the core out. There are so many different muscles that a wrestler uses in our sport, it is so important to be well-rounded by developing not only strength, but flexibility, balance, and stamina as well. If you do not have a strong core, it really does not matter how much you can bench or curl because during an intense practice or against a good opponent, your core weakness will be exposed. The core of a human body is basically from just below the chest, down to the upper thighs. This includes the front, back, and sides of the body in this area. Building a solid core can be easy for some, difficult for others. Generally most kids have a decent chance to build and keep a strong core, but as our nation becomes more and more obese, it is harder to have a strong mid-section. Keeping kids active and interested in being healthy is a full time job, but none the less an important one.

So...If you want to start training and working out, have your child start with their own body weight first. If a 9 or 10 year old kid can't do 20-25 good push ups, he has no business lifting weights. If you feel your son is ready for weight lifting, start with light manageable weight and high reps focusing on the proper motion of the particular lift. Make sure all the equipment is safe, and that you, the coaches, and the athlete know how to use the equipment properly. If you want someone to help you design a

lifting plan for your son, seek out a professional trainer or someone qualified to compose such a workout or training routine.

As for the students entering Junior High, we have been introducing lifting to our wrestlers for several years. Many of the kids come in and want to jump on the bench press and just see how much they can lift. Not only is this meaningless, but a good way to get hurt. The first week I like to sit the kids down in front of each machine, show them how it works, tell them what muscles/body parts it affects, and then do a demonstration. We teach them how to spot one another, which exercises need a buddy or spotter, how to put a weight and collar on a bar and take it off, and also how to put things back where they go when they are done! By the end of the third week the kids have the exercises down. We use log sheets to keep track of progress, and I like to change up the workouts every 3 weeks, that way we do not get into any training ruts. The coaching staff also lifts with the kids, and occasionally we will put ourselves in workout groups and partner up with the kids, which they always enjoy. In recent years we have combined the summer Jr. High and High School lifting at our facility in the Field House. While I feel that this is good for chemistry and program unity, there are certainly some lifts and exercises the high school kids do that the Jr. High kids need to be extremely careful doing, if at all. The first two that come to mind are deadlift and squats. Many high schools offer strength-training programs for junior high athletes who will eventually compete at the high school level. Most commonly you see this in football, but other sports as well. I have heard of other school systems across the state having injury problems due to their weight training, where an adequate Jr. High program was not in place, so the 7th and 8th graders did the same lifting program the high school kids did. On the surface this may sound like a great idea, but many of the younger kids lift incorrectly, use too much weight, or do inappropriate reps, which can lead to injury. For example, there is no need to have a 7th grader doing squats with moderately heavy weight if they cannot correctly perform a squat with only their body weight. Squating can be extremely hard on the back, hips, and knees, so it is imperative that experienced supervision is present at all times. When we teach our kids to squat, we use a three-step process. Step one is correct form with no weight, just the squatting motion. Step two is squatting with just the barbell, no added weights. If the form looks good we go to step three, and start with low weights and go from there. All in all, my staff and I make sure the kids are doing things correctly, so

that when they do get into high school they will pretty much know their way around the weight room. The best way to make sure your children are lifting safely- in any sport, is to ask questions. Talk to the coaches or trainers as well as other parents about the weight room program. Lastly, talk to your own kids. If they are showing up on a regular basis, and are properly instructed and supervised, they should be able to answer basic lifting questions, and show some type of physical growth or improvement.