



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

Children and Weight-lifting

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Resistance training or lifting weights to become stronger helps one develop muscular strength and endurance, essential elements of physical fitness. Most of today's serious athletes take part in some form of resistance training in an effort to become stronger and improve performance as well as to help prevent injuries. Similarly, when designing fitness programs for adults most personal trainers will include some sort of lifting program. Given these facts, people have begun to wonder whether it is important for children to lift weights either as a means for improving their athletic performance or in an effort to improve their overall fitness.

Twenty years ago experts would have told you that having children engage in resistance training prior to puberty would not result in strength improvements because prepubescent children do not have enough of the right hormones in their bodies to allow them to make major strength gains from lifting. They would have also voiced fears relative to growth plate or center injuries—lifting would injure children because their bones are not fully developed. Expert opinion on this has changed, however. While it is true that children cannot gain as much strength as adults, research conducted on children recovering from injuries shows that they can become stronger from regular resistance training and that it will not hurt them when properly done under supervision.

This does not mean, however, that you want to run out and enroll your child in a strength-training program. The biggest danger is that when in a weight room, unsupervised children will try to compete with one another to see who can lift the most weight. This can lead to injury—often because they use poor technique and because they do not check the equipment properly and have an accident. So if your child engages in weight training it should only be done under the supervision of a knowledgeable adult who monitors them 100% of the time. Don't buy a weight set and let them use it whenever they want or turn them loose in the weight room of the local health club.

Proper strength training takes a good deal of discipline and motivation as well and frankly many children are not ready for it. Forcing them to strength train when they do not want to will only erode future motivation.

So my advice to you is not to sign your nine year old up for strength training. However, you should do everything possible to encourage him or her to engage in regular physical activity and rough and tumble (but safe play) play. Help children find some sports that they like and encourage regular participation in them. Doing so will help the children develop the strength they need and when they get a little older (in high school) they might consider strength training. However, a knowledgeable professional such as a physical education teacher or personal trainer should guide this strength training.