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Should Age Group Swimmers do Weight Training?

“My daughter is 10 years old and not very strong. Should she be involved with a weight training program at this age?”

From the editorial Staff at ASCA: First, let’s be clear on what we mean by “weight training” or “resistance training” or “strength training” – all are used interchangeably in the literature and in popular usage. While there is no official definition of weight training, to most people it implies the lifting of heavy weights. Visions come to mind of a red-faced and straining athlete with arms quivering attempting just one more repetition of a weight loaded barbell during a bench press. There is a place for this type of training, but probably not with most children under the age of pubescence.

Weight training is, in fact, a very broad term encompassing use of all types of equipment from no equipment at all – body weight exercises (calisthenics) -- to stretch cords, to medicine balls, to dumbbells, to machines, etc.. A better term for weight training in our swimming world is “dryland training.”

Dryland training is a crucial part of a swimming program for all ages. With the decline of quality physical education in many parts of the country we are now seeing children with poorly developed basic skills such as balance, proprioceptive ability, and coordination. Dryland training can help build these skills as well as help swimmers improve strength.

Let’s look at the strength component of dryland training as this is the area many parents have concerns over safety and injuries.

Research has shown that weight training carries the same risk for children as it does for adults, no more and no less. The majority of injuries come from overreaching with too much weight or from accidents from dropped weights or overcrowded conditions. Reports of damaged growth plates from lifting heavy weights have been exaggerated, research shows. However, caution is still important and pre-pubescent children should not be lifting to failure using weights which limits them to 6 repetitions or less. Use less weight, more reps; at least 8 to 10.

Age 7 and under’s can do basic exercises with little or no weight, calisthenics, and balance and coordination exercises. Learning proper technique is very important. Children 8 to 10 can increase the number of exercises and add a bit of weight. 1 to 2 pound Dumbbells are highly recommended as they require balance and each side of the body to do its own work. 11 to 13 year olds continue to add exercises, improve technique, and add resistance. Noted major league baseball trainer Vern Gambetta says he can make a professional athlete wince using only 15 pound dumbbells – surely our 11 – 13 year olds can receive significant results with much less than 10 pound weights.

There are hundreds of light resistance exercises available for the coach to prescribe to prepubescent children without danger of injury. We believe that a well balanced, well supervised, and progressive dryland program is beneficial to a young swimmer’s total fitness as well as long term swimming success.

Portions of this article refer to material from Drs. Kraemer and Fleck’s Strength Training for Young Athletes and Dr. Ernie Maglischo’s Training Age Group and Masters Swimmers.