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Nutrition for Health

Tip Sheet – Strength Training for Children

Jane Clark, Ph.D.
Professor & Chair
Department of Kinesiology
University of Maryland

Strength training for children can be beneficial provided that it is done properly. Strength training exercises can increase children's strength and muscle endurance and may help their performance in sport. However, the exercises must be age-appropriate, safe, and supervised and directed by a qualified adult. Strength training should not be confused with weightlifting, body building or power lifting. Strength training for children should include light weights with many repetitions rather lifting heavy weights, and controlled movements that emphasize proper techniques.

What's the best age to start strength training? Physical activity, in general, can strengthen muscles. But a specific strength training program where children are trying to achieve specific muscle strength and endurance should begin in late elementary and middle school. Preteens benefit more from strength training than young children. Five to seven year-olds should focus on movement fundamentals such as body control, balance, and coordination. As children engage in specific sports (usually around 8 years of age), they may be interested in strengthening their muscles. Proper instruction should be provided and all strength training should be supervised by a qualified adult. If it is part of a physical education program, be sure that children warm up and cool down, develop individualized strength training programs that track their progress, and the activity is fun!

Remember encouraging physical activity for all children is important. Strength training can be an important component of a physically active lifestyle. If done appropriately for the child's developmental level, strength training has important health benefits. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Sports Medicine, and the National Strength and Conditioning Association all support strength training for children – but only done properly.

Dr. Clark's work focuses on understanding the development of movement control and coordination. She has published numerous articles on motor skill development in children.

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