

# Starting Strength

## Youngsters Need Strength Too

by

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For as long as I can remember, there has been the idea that lifting weights is harmful to young people. The medical community has totally supported this notion, even though there has never been any scientific study to substantiate this claim. It's based completely on conjecture. The objection to lifting heavy objects at a young age has to do with the growth plates in the long bones of the body. If these growth plates are stressed, the theory postulates, there will be an adverse affect on the eventual height of the youngster. In other words, lifting weights can stunt his growth.

Makes perfect, logical sense doesn't it? Yet, I happen to believe that it's a false assumption. If it were true, then it naturally follows that a young athlete would need to wait until he was in his twenties to begin any sort of strength training program because that's when the body stops growing. Upward at least. And there have never been any studies to support this allegation. However, there have been many studies done in Europe on this very topic. I've read several that have been done on youngsters, some a young as six years old, who began strength training and none reported any damage of growth plates when they were fully grown. In fact, those that took part in some form of weight training at an early age surpassed the average height of their counterparts who did not do any lifting.

Also, I never bought into the concept because I watched many of my neighbors and classmates get a great deal bigger and stronger from doing very physical labor when they were quite young. I grew up in a farming community where young boys were fully expected to carry their share of the work load as soon as possible. Most joined the work force of their families well before they even entered elementary school. As they grew older and bigger, the chores became more and more strenuous. Some tasks were extremely physical: throwing bales of hay and straw high up on a wagon, lugging bags of feed, manhandling stock, digging post holes, driving a team of horses or mules, using a scythe all day to cut hay or corn. Demanding, energy-sapping labor that often lasted from daybreak to sundown.

Did all of these boys end up being shorter than their parents? Hardly. In general, they were typically much larger and taller. They also ended up being the best athletes on all of the teams in high school. Their shorter and more puny classmates, in which I include myself, were not involved in any physical labor, or certainly not to the extent as our farming classmates.

I have always believed that doing physical activities at a young age was hugely beneficial to the individual. What I observed growing up proved the point to me and I wanted to take part in lifting weights so I could stimulate my body so it would grow. What most fail to understand is that a great many of the daily chores on a farm are basically forms of weight training. Even now that so much of the labor is mechanized, there is still a great deal of lifting, pulling, and pushing of heavy objects.

## *Youngsters Need Strength Too*

Ironically enough, some of the programs being used by strength athletes, especially strongman events, now include many of the same movements done by farmers and other laborers as part of their daily lives.

What added to my belief in stimulating the young body with resistance exercises was the fact that once I did have the opportunity to lift weights, my body responded accordingly, within one thirty day period, I added a pound of bodyweight a day and grew two inches taller. I am certain that it was the weight training that triggered my growth spurt and wished I had been able to do it much earlier in my life. But since I had nothing to support my idea on the subject, there was little I could do to convince parents to introduce their sons to weight training. And I was up against the medical community, so I stood no chance to get mothers and fathers to agree with me.

Then I did get my hands on some research that validated my views on the subject. When I was editing *Strength & Health* with Tommy Suggs in the mid and late sixties, I was contacted by an Olympic lifting coach in Russia. He said he would trade me inside dope on what the Russians were doing in training for copies of *S&H*. It was not available behind the Iron Curtain. Deal. One of the studies he sent me dealt with training youngsters. There were a few test subjects as young as six. The study was longitudinal, covering a span of ten years.

Americans like to think that they care more about their children than any other country, but it is simply not true. We may pamper them more since we have the means to do so, but we do not love them more. The Russians cherish their children and this study was set up to find out whether lifting weights might indeed be harmful to a child over an extended period of time. A major part of the study was to compare the effects of training between those who participated in swimming and those doing strength work. The assumed hypothesis was that swimming was very safe and weight training was risky in terms of health and well being,

What they discovered was there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of overall development, except that the weight trained athletes had more muscle mass and much better posture. There was no evidence of any disruption in the growth process in either group. Which told me that weight training was a better form of exercise for youngsters than swimming. But, admittedly, I'm prejudiced.

Of course, I fully realize that parents have other concerns besides the growth plates when it comes to weight training for their children. The biggest being the risk of injury while training. But it seems to me, in light of what's going on in the way of the sports world that worrying about a youngster getting hurt in the weight room is beside the point when those same parents encourage their offspring to take part in a great many activities and sports that are downright dangerous. Pee-Wee football and youth hockey are two excellent examples. It's fine to barrel head-on into an opponent running at full speed on the ice or a football field, yet doing squats or power cleans is strictly taboo.

Even more crazy is how many parents not only allow, but fully support, them in taking part in the popular sport of skateboarding. Even if they do not participate in competitions, they ride their boards recklessly on the streets and sidewalks. Falls bring blood and bad falls break bones and skulls, even with the protective equipment. But absolutely no lifting weights. This is so illogical. You're telling me that it's okay to be gang tackled or to crash and burn on a skateboard, but it's not okay to lift weights? Figure that out.

What I think is that one of the very best things any parent could do for his son or daughter is to teach them how to do a wide variety of exercises in the weight room safely. When done properly, a weight program can enhance a great many attributes that can then be used in any other type of physical activity. A well-designed weight routine can help the athlete gain strength and add muscle

## *Youngsters Need Strength Too*

to his frame. This is something every young person greatly desires. Weight training will also have a positive effect on joint strength and this, in turn, will greatly reduce the number and severity of injuries to the shoulders, back, hips, knees, ankles and wrists. And let's not forget the neck.

While in most foreign countries, it's not the least bit unusual for pre-teens to lift weights on a regular basis, in the U.S, it is. About the only very young athletes who get to take advantage of learning this valuable discipline are sons and daughters of former weightlifters. They understand that a properly administered weight routine can be most helpful for their offsprings' success in any sport they choose. Since most of these coaches train at a home-based facility, their children get to watch their fathers, and sometimes mothers, go through workouts in the weight room. Kids naturally mimic their parents, so they express a desire to lift weights too. I've received photos and videos of children no older than five doing perfect squat snatches, cleans, and jerks.

I'm betting that many readers are cringing at the thought of that, but think about it: those are very athletic movements and the kids are not going after any state records. They're doing them because they're fun and in the process they're learning skills that will serve them for the rest of their lives. The bottom line is that weight training is very beneficial for young athletes if the program is fundamentally sound. Lifting weights is most certainly more sensible than allowing them to play full-contact sports. Keep in mind that relatively tame sports such as soccer and baseball still involve a great deal of hard contact.

I believe a youngster can begin to learn how to do resistance training in the form of lifting weights at any age. The guideline I use is not the chronological age of the youngster, but rather the maturity level. Is the kid able to take direction from a coach and maintain discipline during the workouts? This is a far better gauge than age. I've dealt with some ten year-olds who were more focused than athletes who were in their teens. It boils down to dealing with an individual personality rather than with age.

The most important point in my estimation is this – the youngster has to want to be a part of a strength training program. If you try and push him into lifting weights when he doesn't want to do so, the results will be minimal, if there are any results at all. And he should ease into a program, not jump in with both feet. The nice thing about dealing with youngsters – and I'm basically speaking about kids who are at least in their teens – is there's plenty of time ahead. No reason to rush things. Allow them to move forward at their own speed and they will learn to appreciate the activity. Push them and they'll bail out at the first opportunity.

Those who have had some success in the sport of weightlifting can usually coach young athletes better than those who have not. I've seen several fathers who wanted their boys to be excellent Olympic or powerlifters not only push their kids too fast, but they ignored one of the cardinal rules about training anyone. Form must be adhered to religiously at every session. Using correct technique for anyone wanting to get stronger is important, but when dealing with a youngster, it's absolutely essential.

I mentioned that I am of the opinion that weight training is a perfectly safe activity for youngsters, but I need to add a trailer to that. It's perfectly safe if all of the exercises done in the routine are done correctly. This doesn't just apply to young athletes, however. That same rule also covers anyone of any age. But there seems to be a longer range effect when a young body is dinged lifting weights than when it happens to an older athlete. Not that the youngster doesn't recover as fast. In truth, he recovers faster than his older counterparts. The problem is he is now wary of lifting weights and will in all likelihood never go back to lifting weights for whatever reason ever again.

## *Youngsters Need Strength Too*

When I was at the Marion YMCA, the father of a fourteen year-old started training with the Olympic lifting team three nights a week. The father was an excellent coach who had produced two state champions. His boy was not in the least athletic and had difficulty in doing the basic movements. It was obvious that he would never excel at Olympic lifting, so his father pushed him to do well in powerlifting, which was gaining in popularity across Indiana at that time.

Which was fine – pick a sport and do your utmost to get better at it. The problem was he could not do a full squat properly, regardless of how much weight was on the bar. His back would invariably round when he brought the bar through the middle. It was a glaring form fault, yet his father was so intent that he squat 300 pounds that he kept adding more and more weight regardless of how ugly his technique was. Some of us would turn our heads away when the boy squatted. It was that bad. And the father got his wish. The boy did indeed squat 300 pounds, in what appeared to be more of a goodmorning than an actual squat. The father's joy was short-lived, however. While performing that personal record, his son strained his middle and lower back. We never saw him in the weight room again. Blame weight training? I think not. Blame a blind, overzealous father? You bet.

Yet to the casual observer, weight training was the culprit. How can innocent hunks of metal be either good or bad? I compare weights to the automobile. Both can be instruments of joy and delight when handled properly and conversely they can be objects of pain and destruction. It's all in how they're used and this not only applies to young athletes but to anyone who picks up a barbell. It's a rule of nature.

In contrast to the coach who pushes his kids too hard and too fast, there are a great many more who do just the opposite; they set up a program that is far too easy. They do this out of fear of doing what the fanatical father did to his son in Marion. So they always make sure the youngster stays under his limits. Workouts are short and in some cases, only a broomstick or piece of plastic pipe is used on all the exercises. The workouts are so easy that the youngsters don't even break a sweat. As a result, there is little or no progress and the youngster loses interest in a hurry. What's the sense of spending time in the weight room when there is no increase in strength?

These coaches are so worried about having a youngster overtrain or overexert that their programs are worthless. The young body responds to resistance training just like that of older athletes. The main difference between a pre-teen and a teen are hormones. How the muscles and attachments respond to a certain movement is exactly the same. Just like it's the same for a female and male. And in order for the human body – young, old, male, female – to respond favorably, it has to be pushed. Not necessarily *shoved*, but always nudged forward to some degree. If this doesn't occur, there will be no strength gains and all interest in the activity will be lost.

Parents often tell me that they are concerned that when they give their kids a difficult workout, it will tire them out too much. In other words, they will become overtrained. To them, this is the ultimate sin. It isn't. Kids overtrain all the time. It's part of their nature, to push to exhaustion. And it's no big deal. They simply obtain the rest they need and go on their merry way.

A friend of mine brought his twelve year-old son to the Hopkins weight room one day so I could check out his form. He had learned the Olympic lifts and the boy was very adept at all of the quick lifts. But he only gave him enough exercises, sets, and reps to keep him busy for 40 minutes. I asked him why he didn't add more work, because it was clear that the boy had an abundance of energy left. He wasn't ready for more, his father declared, and I let it drop. I had plenty to deal with as it was. A bit later I went up to the office to make some copies and looked in on the basketball court. There was the aspiring young lifter running up and down the court in a spirited game. When he returned to the weight room, he still didn't sit down, He ran from one end of the room to the other, then would

## *Youngsters Need Strength Too*

climb the power racks and swing around on the chinning bar. All that available juice could have been utilized in more lifting.

Teenagers, and pre-teens as well, have a bountiful supply of energy. The problem as I see it isn't working them too hard, but not hard enough. They need to be pushed to understand just where their limits are and then to learn how to move up a notch. That's how you progress in any sport and it's the same for strength training.

The primary consideration of every parent when it comes to weight training is safety. This is as it should be, and that's why I make it my number one rule in dealing with youngsters, from pre-teens all the way to those in high school, that they must be supervised in the weight room. To allow youngsters to train on their own or with a group of others of the same age is an invitation to trouble. Young athletes are unable to foresee the consequences of doing something stupid in the weight room. Left alone they will resort to using sloppy technique and will try to lift poundages they're not yet ready to handle. And being competitive by nature, they are easily lured into impromptu contests with their friends and end up getting dinged.

Youngsters, as a rule, love to bench press, as this is currently the lift that determines a person's overall strength. It isn't, of course, but since they believe that they will do their utmost to improve that exercise, often to the exclusion of all the other movements. Overworking the bench press is bad enough, but the genuine danger comes when a youngster tries to bench a limit poundage when he's in the weight room alone. The bench press is the most dangerous lift in all of strength training. More than one lifter has lost some teeth when the bar slipped out of his hands and came crashing down on his face. And every year there are reports of some youngster who was training alone and got stuck with a bar on his chest when he failed to successfully complete a rep, and not knowing how to respond, the weight quickly stopped his breathing. Not a nice way to go, and it should never happen. Should a young athlete feel, for whatever reason, that he must train the bench when he's alone, he should find someone – mother, sister, younger brother, whoever is around – and have them at least be in the weight room with him when he benches. Then, should he get stuck, he will have someone available to either pull the bar off of him, or if that isn't possible, strip the weights from the bar.

Aside from the risk factor, another reason youngsters need supervision is that, if left to their own devices, they will do nothing but upper body exercises. Most parents are worried about doing harm to their children's knees and back when they're lifting weights, but the joints at the greatest risk are the shoulders, elbows, and wrists. These joints are very delicate, and when they are worked relentlessly doing arm and chest exercises, they are easily overworked and break down. And a severely injured wrist, elbow, or shoulder will end up plaguing the kid throughout his life.

If your child expresses an interest in lifting weights, you need to decide if you're capable of handling the task. If you're not, you will need to find someone who is qualified to coach him. Don't be impressed with his certifications. They only indicate that he has gone through a clinic or seminar and passed a written test. No matter how many initials he puts behind his name, they don't mean he knows how to teach a young athlete how to train properly. Check him out. Watch him put someone through a workout. Does he teach precise form or allow the youngsters to use poor technique? Does he push them too hard? Or is he way too easy with them? Does he treat each athlete like an individual or just deal with all of them as a group? There are quite a few good coaches out there, but there are ten times as many that are not so good and are getting by simply by following a set formula. You'll be able to tell the difference if you pay attention.

Should you feel that you are up to the task, the next problem you will face is where to train. Very few fitness facilities allow young athletes in their weight rooms because of the liability issue, so

## *Youngsters Need Strength Too*

you may have to set up your own weight room in your garage. This has lots of advantages, such as being able to adjust the training schedule to meet the demands of both yourself and your youngster. No gym membership fees or having to pay for gas to drive back and forth to a fitness facility. No waiting for a work station or having to train in the presence of idiots or steroid freaks.

The basics are sufficient. For the first three years that I trained with weights, all I had in the way of equipment was a standard bar, a couple hundred pounds of plates, and two adjustable dumbbell handles. That was enough to help me get considerably stronger. So get a bar, an adequate number of plates, a few dumbbells, a power rack or squat rack, and an adjustable bench that can be used for inclines as well as flat benches, and you're in business. Over the ensuing years, you can add to the gym by keeping your eyes peeled for used equipment in the classified ads.

It's a great investment. You're going to be enhancing your youngster's health, and that is the most valuable gift you can ever give him. Most parents find that once a youngster gets involved in strength training, he becomes more health and body conscious. After a tough session in the weight room, he falls to sleep much more readily and begins to show interest in eating more wholesome foods and ignoring those that provide only empty calories.

Also, as he starts gaining more muscular bodyweight and strength, he finds that he is more proficient in his chosen sports at school and his overall confidence is elevated. And, to his surprise and delight, members of the opposite sex who previously shunned him are now showing interest. Adding muscle and size is a heady deal for any youngster, especially if he happens to be considerably smaller than his classmates. Gaining strength elevates a youngster's self-esteem like nothing else can.

This article is about convincing parents that it's perfectly all right for their children to take part in a strength program. When done correctly, it's safe and extremely beneficial in helping to lower the risk of being injured while playing a sport. Getting stronger is an advantage to anyone at any age, but particularly so for youngsters. It can completely change their conception of themselves, and this attitude will carry over to all the other endeavors they take part in as well. In the next installment, I'll go over how to put together a functional strength program for youngsters. In the meantime, as a parent you might want to nose around and try to find a capable instructor for you child, or, better yet, start assembling a gym at home.

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