

Starting Strength

Training Kids

by

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In barbell training, a coach meets people of all different walks of life. The spectrum is broad – young and old, genetically gifted and physically challenged. It's been my experience that children age 8–15 are some of the most challenging people to coach. Sure, the extremely elderly trainee is a challenge and is limited to certain exercises, but they're easier to deal with than the rambunctious 12-year-old who wants to max out every time he trains. This article is to help the beginner coach and give some pointers so you're not left standing there, staring maliciously at the kid hoping he never comes back.

Every young trainee is uncoordinated. Some are better at controlling the eccentric descent portions of the movement than others, but most are still very new-born-deer-like. Taking them through the teaching methods of the lifts can be frustrating; kids tend to fidget and squirm *a lot*. This is where the tactile cues come in handy – you can forcefully move them into position and tell them, “This is what it's supposed to feel like,” even though they will forget it ten seconds later.

Take the squat teaching method for example: you're going to have to grab the youngster and make him lean over while explaining that “this is what you need to do.” Constantly touching the lumbar spine to enforce hip drive and shoving him into the low-bar position several times will help drill these steps into the brain. As the young trainee performs the lifts, you're going to see the “dive bomb” – the uncontrolled eccentric drop into the bottom. Making him count to five or more during the descent teaches him to hold his tightness and get the bounce from the hips rather than the knees. Each time before the next rep, repeat the tactile cue and gradually change the touch into a vocal demand. Over many sessions, the youngster will remember the cues and set up correctly.

The most challenging problem for a young trainee is keeping the lumbar spine in extension. A few techniques and stretches will teach them what it's supposed to feel like. The “Superman” stretch is one of my personal favorites – have the kid lie down on his belly and lift up his legs and arms like the way Superman flies through the air. Have him do this until the lower back is cramping, and then touch the location while saying “this is what it's supposed to feel like.” With this new feeling in his back, make



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him recreate it while standing up, and then while going through the squat and deadlift (you may have to start out with rack pulls and gradually work the bar down to the floor for the deadlift). A few verbal cues like “lift your butt up” and “Superman” will remind the young trainee to hold lumbar extension.

Along with being uncoordinated, you’ll meet kids who are extremely weak. Making them squat the empty 45-pound bar or even the 22-pound bar may not be possible, and this is when the leg press comes into the equation. Manipulating the sets/reps to accommodate the lack of strength is very important – 3 work sets of 10 or 12 reps are a good start until the trainee can leg press around 85 pounds. At this point it is fine to graduate to the bar.

Training young athletes will test your patience and your sanity. If you’ve been around kids, you understand this, but it’s more challenging when it’s not your kids that you have to deal with. You can’t yell at the little shit to stop messing around on the treadmills and get under the bar (well, you can yell at them, but not as colorfully as you’d like). Instead you must be demanding but not too harsh, or the kid goes and tells mommy.

You must understand this important rule when training young athletes: *kids have the attention span of a cow*. They’re going to focus for exactly as long as they have to, and then rush to their phones or to whatever it is that keeps them intrigued. In the short window of time spent actually listening, you must make eye contact and tell them what to focus on during the set. Eye contact is vital – without it, they’ll think you’re just talking to them instead of *instructing* them. If you’re training a group of kids, it helps tremendously to coach them in a cycle; when kid A goes under the bar, kid B is on deck, while kid C is resting after completing the working set, and repeat. Kids can be very unaccountable also, one week they’re training and the next week they’ll be “sick.” It’s frustrating, but again, training kids isn’t for everyone.

During the time you spend training kids, you’ll eventually come across one that is very committed and loves to come into the gym and go to work. Just like the older clients who are stable and committed, it makes the job easier. The dedicated kid serves as a good model to the rest of the pack for what they need to do to become strong. Plus, it’s rewarding to see them grow and become stronger each time they come into the gym.

Kids are a challenge, but watching them mature and bloom is very rewarding. You slowly start to see the young trainee pick up behaviors and thoughts from the coach. Essentially, you’re molding the kid into a strong, responsible, and critically-thinking individual. This is very important not only to the kid, but to society. Slowly but surely, you can help change the world into a strong, morally correct and prosperous place – one kid at a time.

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