

Strength Training Takes on Many Forms

Sean Skahan

Strength and Conditioning Coach- Anaheim Ducks

Whenever I have the opportunity to interact with coaches and parents, I'm always asked the question: When can my son/daughter start strength training?

My general response is around 12 to 14 years old, depending on the physical maturity level of the child, but I always have to take into consideration their perception of strength training.

Usually, the perspective from a parent's view is lifting really heavy weights with barbells or dumbbells while grunting and straining through each repetition. That's probably not something I'd recommend for kids under the ages of 12-14.

But when you think about it, kids are already strength training in lots of different ways; it just may not seem like it because it doesn't have any real structure.

Some of the most basic strength-training advice is to "master body-weight exercises first, and when proper technique is established, add resistance."

That's true in a traditional sense, because we wouldn't want to put a barbell with weight on a young kid's back and ask them to do squats without being able to execute a proper body-weight squat. However, how many times do we see young kids doing body-weight exercises without thinking that they might be "strength training?"

Have you ever seen a kid squat down to pick something up? Or maybe they do some plyometrics while playing games that include jumping or hopping at the park? I really enjoy watching my 3-year-old son do this all the time; so is 3 years old too young for plyometrics?

As parents and coaches, we may tend to be afraid of having our young athletes participate in a series of exercises because we may view it as traditional strength training. However, we may not realize that kids may already be strength training or doing plyometrics without even thinking about it.

When kids put on their hockey equipment and go out and practice, that could technically be considered strength training when you think about adding resistance to body weight. Off the ice, kids are squatting, lunging, running, hopping and skipping all the time; unfortunately, there are also many kids who are sitting on their butts way too much while playing video games or surfing the Internet after school.

First and foremost, I would recommend young kids to start playing more sports and games. As for a traditional routine, in my opinion, there's nothing wrong with kids doing body-weight exercises such as push-ups, pull-ups, squats, lunges and step-ups, which are movements that kids should be doing. These exercises done with strict adherence to proper technique are beneficial.

Kids can start understanding that strength training for hockey should include exercises that involve multi-muscle and joint movements. Leave the single-joint exercises, such as bicep curls and leg extensions, for the aspiring bodybuilders. Then, when they're 12-14 years old, they can start adding resistance in the form of a barbell or light dumbbells and start progressing from there.

But first, we may need to get some of them off their butts and start moving.