

How-To Article

How to keep your child on the field and out of the doctor's office: Five strategies for proper youth sports strength training

By Anna Taylor

More and more children are getting involved in individual and team sports and in today's ultra-competitive world that means more than just running around. It's about learning proper techniques that can help prevent injuries. Strength training isn't a fad for athletes; it's a necessity.

Injuries happen in any sport because of the physical nature of athletics. Using your body always has risks attached to it, but proper strength training reduces those risks. It's about learning how your body works and how to use it properly. It's important to start out with the help of a certified trainer who can show you how to move your body properly.

We consulted a personal trainer for the some of the best practices for young athletes new to the gym. Ally Sharpe, functional range conditioning – mobility specialist, is the head trainer at Peterborough Strength and has coached over 500 people since she started her business in 2010.

Sharpe says to consider the evolutionary process. Our bodies were not designed to be stagnant all day sitting at a desk, but nor were they designed to throw 200 pitches per week at record speeds; to withstand tackles from 300 pound linebackers; to have sharp blades strapped to the bottom of our feet; or to withstand blows to the head from pucks, balls or bodies.

"But here we are - doing these things daily, weekly, monthly and yearly. It's really not surprising there are so many injuries occurring in youth sports," Sharpe says. You can't prevent an injury from occurring, she advises, but you can reduce the severity of the injury or its duration.

Read on for Sharpe's best strategies to keep your child out of the doctor's office and on their favourite playing field.

1. Fix the weak links first

Every human body has weak spots which can arise from daily activities – or lack thereof. If our joints don't have the adequate range of motion, compensation can occur which will likely result in an injury. "I like to use the analogy of car alignment," Sharpe says. "Can you drive a car that's out of alignment? Of course! Should you? Probably not. Will damage occur if you do? Sure will! What will accelerate the damage? Frequency, intensity and duration." In short? Make sure the parts of your body that are more prone to injury are strengthened by paying special attention to them.

2. Bare feet are best

Sharpe says that lower-extremity injuries are most common in youth sports. “Kids should be spending as much time barefoot as possible,” she advises. “The more the feet are utilized the stronger the musculature will be.” Wearing socks and shoes reduces the sensory feedback the feet receive from the ground and weakens them.

3. Don't discount school-yard play

For children under 10, one of the best strength training programs is a playground. “Monkey bars, climbing, swinging, jumping and crawling - these are all fantastic for child athletic development and always overlooked!” Sharpe says. “A good strength coach will ensure your kids are working at developing foundational movement skills that will improve their game through a structured year-round program - not simply giving them exercises that make them tired.” So yes, get them into a gym with a certified trainer, but always let them be kids and run around the playground, too. Natural development is important.

4. Train for more than one sport

Specializing in one sport increases the likelihood of burnout, says Sharpe. Most kids get into sports because they're fun, but facing pressure to play can negatively affect their mental and physical health. Overuse injuries become common, especially in youth baseball, and then require time-off for rehabilitation. “I like to believe that the small percentage of youth that become professional athletes don't need year-round work,” Sharpe says. Let kids be kids and play for the love of the game.

5. Sleep, baby, sleep

Recovery and rest is essential! “Make sure your child is eating enough quality food to refuel and drinking enough water. Nothing will affect performance and cognitive function like not being fueled properly,” Sharpe advises. Depending on age, children require between eight and 11 hours of sleep per night, but it's not just sleep that's important. Don't let your kids work too hard – let them enjoy themselves, and if they tire themselves out from running around, know you're doing a good job.

If you're in the Peterborough area, Ally would love to consult with you about the best programs for your child! Contact her at Hybrid: Fitness Health Performance at 822 Rye Street or visit her website at <http://allysharpe.com>.