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## Strength Training Programs for Children Gain Popularity

Aug 1, 2011 12:00 PM, By Kelsey Cipolla, contributing writer

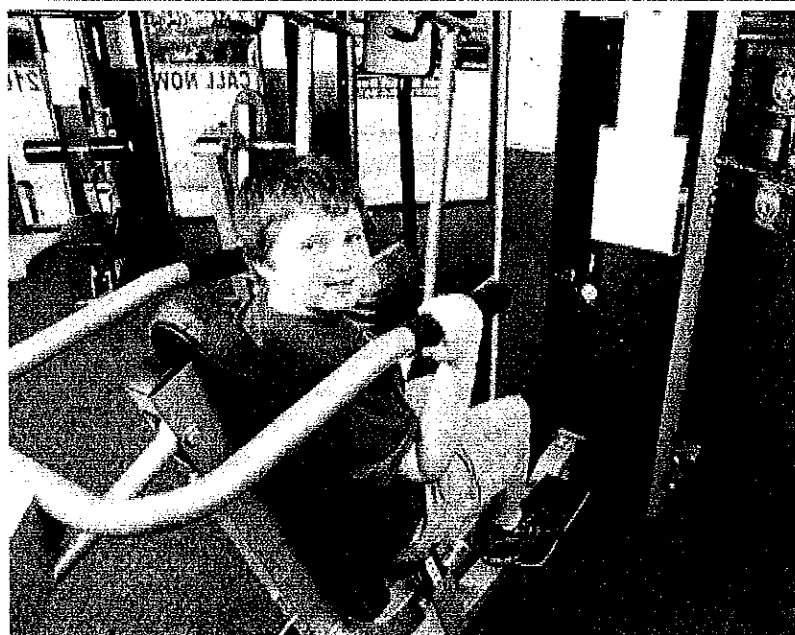
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Children work out using equipment developed specifically for use by kids at Fitwize 4 Kids, Coral Springs, FL. Photo courtesy of Fitwize 4 Kids.

For decades, strength training was considered unwise for children because it stunted growth, but times have changed. Children's strength training has become popular in the years, especially after the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Guidelines for Americans advised children to do muscle-strengthening activities.

Children and teens represent a **growing market in the health club industry** (<http://clubindustry.com/forprofits/0301-clubs-fight-child-obesity/index.html>). The number of 6- to 11-year-olds who exercise at health clubs has increased by 20 percent during the last five years, while the number of 12- to 17-year-olds has increased by almost 3 percent annually, according to the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association (IHRSA). Now, fitness facility operators are adding children's programs to attract families and increase revenue while improving the health of children and preventing obesity and overweight. But developing programs for children at health clubs is a challenge.

"Health clubs blow it when they take their adult programs and try to market them to children," says Dr. Robert Faigenbaum, an exercise science professor at the College of New Jersey. "You can't just take an adult program and put a child in it."

Children are not miniature adults, he says. Their motivation for exercising is different from adults, and their bodies are still developing. "If you take the fun out of physical activity, you take the children out of it," he says.

To create a program that is both fun and effective, Faigenbaum recommends explaining exercises as games and making tasks specific enough to challenge children without being too difficult for them to complete successfully. Age and skill level also should be taken into consideration, since younger children will have different needs and abilities than older children.

"Grouping them into age-appropriate and ability-appropriate programs is certainly a concern," says Phil Norton, operations manager at Cincinnati Sports Club. "You have to be careful not to put kids in a class that's too advanced for them." He offers weekly group exercise classes and personal training sessions for kids.

Norton says that children who train at his club often fall into one of two groups: kids who come to seriously train and improve on some aspect of their fitness (like learning a sport) and children who are forced into exercising by parents who feel guilty about their children's unhealthy habits. Keeping the programs fun and motivating is key to getting kids to reach their goals, Norton says. A child who is less enthusiastic about fitness will see better results working with a trainer who can provide encouragement and motivation. "If you have a child whose exercise goals are reachable, whereas athletic kids might benefit from the competition of a class and not need the extra motivation of a trainer."

Although Cincinnati Sports Club charges for some of its youth programs and occasionally markets to soccer clubs, most classes are included in membership fees, Norton says. Their value is in helping attract and retain families and adding value to memberships.

**NEXT PAGE: EQUIPMENT AND CONCERNS** (<http://clubindustry.com/forprofits/strength-training-children-gain-popularity-20110801/index.html>)



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The Kishwaukee Family YMCA, Sycamore, IL, offers fitness [programs for toddlers through teens](http://blog.clubindustry.com/fitnessbusiness/on-a-whole-new-meaning/). Kim Jass-Ramirez, community outreach director, says the Y's strength classes for children do not require the facility little to run and are well attended, so a profit could easily be made even though that is not the Y's goal. She adds that the equipment is particularly in the facility for adults.

To successfully [cater to such a wide range of ages](http://clubindustry.com/forprofits/fitness-club-trends-20110101/), the facility adjusts the act sure they are appealing and appropriate for specific groups, Jass-Ramirez says. Younger children might be too small or too easily distracted to safe better results using medicine balls and doing exercises that use their own body weight.

Older kids who can use adult equipment correctly may find working out in the grown-ups' room an added incentive, although children between 12 special training to use the equipment without supervision, Jass-Ramirez says. Different age groups also have different attitudes. Younger kids find rewarding, whereas teens enjoy it because they can socialize and use electronic training partners, she adds.

Both Jass-Ramirez and Norton say that parents rarely express concern about their children's involvement in strength training programs, which are and body building programs that have been the subject of recent controversy.

At Fitwize 4 Kids, Coral Springs, FL, the strength-training equipment is designed specifically for children. The machines allow for multi-joint, ckc reduce the likelihood of damaging growth plates and maximum compression forces that increase bone density in adolescents and pre-adolescents,

Although using the appropriate equipment is important, the instructor is what truly determines if a program is successful.

"You need an instructor that absolutely loves working with children," Faigenbaum says.

A trainer who can draw a packed class of adults might fail when faced with a younger audience. Good instructors for children often have backgro classroom management, since a roomful of kids can get rowdy without necessary guidance, he says.

Beyond being a good addition to youth programming, strength training provides an opportunity to improve more than the physical health of a child.

"Without a doubt, strength training for children builds confidence," Jass-Ramirez says. "While our programs are open to all youth, we especially may not enjoy sports or have not been successful with other types of exercise. Children who are overweight can usually lift a good amount of weight experience that success."