Guidelines for Teaching Free-Weight Exercises

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Because of the increasing popularity of weight training for children of all ages, it is important that physical educators at the middle school and high school levels have the knowledge and skill to teach a wide variety of weight training techniques. For those schools that offer weight training courses, instructors need to have a knowledge of all basic free-weight exercises.

The instructor should be able to demonstrate and correct mistakes for each exercise. He or she should understand all aspects of weight room safety and spotting. Ideally, the instructor should be actively involved in a personal fitness program that includes weight training.

Teaching an exercise that involves the use of free weights calls for close supervision at all times. The instructor should always stress good form, proper body alignment, full range of motion, and slow, controlled repetitions.

In teaching each individual free-weight exercise, it is recommended that the instructor follow several important guidelines for proper technique and safety. The sample exercise used here to explain each guideline is the bench press, but the same guidelines can be used to teach any free-weight exercise.

The Guidelines

1. Introduce the exercise and describe the body area that is affected.
   This should be the first step in teaching any exercise. During this phase the instructor identifies the exercise and briefly describes how it is performed. At this time he or she also identifies the muscle or muscle groups that will be affected. Introduce the bench press in this way:
   - Bench press is a very popular free-weight exercise.
   - Bench press requires that a spotter be present.
   - Bench press develops upper body size and strength.
   - Muscle groups affected are the chest and triceps.

2. Explain and demonstrate the proper body position and hand grip.
   During this phase the instructor should explain whether the exercise is done in a sitting, standing, or lying position. He or she should demonstrate and explain proper foot placement, body position, body alignment, and hand grip. Bench press body position and grip involve the following steps:
   - Lie on the bench with the hips, back, and head in contact with the bench.
   - Feet should be flat on the floor.
   - The lifter should not lie directly under the bar as it rests on the rack.
   - A reverse (pronated) hand grip should be used.
   - The grip should be slightly wider than shoulder width.

3. Explain and demonstrate the lifting technique.
   The instructor now demonstrates the actual technique: starting position, lifting action, and finished position. It is important that the demonstration be exact and that the instructor explain all
aspects of the lift. Demonstrate as follows:

- The bar is lifted directly over the chest with the arms in a locked position.
- The bar is lowered in a controlled manner until it touches the lifter's chest.
- Once the bar touches the chest, the lifter should press upward until the arms are fully extended.
- As the arms extend, the lifter should exhale.

4. Demonstrate common errors and how to correct them.

After the lifting demonstration, the instructor should point out common mistakes in form and technique that might occur with beginners. This is very important because errors in technique can lead to injuries and accidents. Correcting form and technique is often a continuous aspect of instruction. Common errors in bench press technique are these:

- A grip that is uneven and causes the bar to tilt;
- Lifting the hips off the bench or the feet off the floor;
- Lowering the weight too fast;
- Improper breathing patterns;
- Not fully extending at the top of each repetition.

5. Demonstrate and explain proper spotting and safety techniques.

Students should understand that certain exercises require a spotter for safety and that the lifter and spotter should act as a team. The teaching of an exercise is not complete until the instructor teaches the proper spotting technique. Any exercise you teach should use the following guidelines for spotting:

- Spot any lift that imposes a danger to the lifter.
- Use at least one primary spotter for dangerous lifts.
- Use secondary spotters for some exercises.
- Urge spotters to concentrate at all times.
- Spot the lift from beginning to end.

The bench press is spotted as follows:

- The spotter should take a position at the head of the bench.
- Allow the lifter to assume the grip and check to see whether the grip is evenly spaced.
- The spotter should not release the bar until it is directly over the lifter's chest.
- During the repetitions, the spotter's hands should remain close to the bar.
- If the lifter has any difficulty, the spotter should grasp the bar and help bring it to the extended position.
- After the last repetition, the spotter and the lifter should return the bar back to the rack together. Never let the lifter return the bar to the rack alone.

6. Monitor students as they lift and spot.

While the students are practicing the various exercises, the instructor should circulate constantly in order to observe as they lift and spot. If a student is having difficulty with any aspect of the lifting or spotting, further instruction and demonstration may be necessary. It may even be necessary to use kinesthetic manipulation to guide the bar or body parts through the correct range of motion.

It is also a good idea to let students practice first with unweighted lifts using broom handles or plastic pipes. This technique is safe and gives the instructor a chance to check form and technique before allowing students to attempt real weights. Monitor the bench press as follows:

- Circulate and observe each student as he or she lifts and spots.
- Use unweighted lifts first (e.g., broom handles or plastic pipes).
- Guide the bar during repetitions so the students can experience the correct movement.
- Additional lifting and spotting demonstrations may be necessary.

Summary

Free-weight exercises should be a part of any weight training course. The use of free weights has become very popular for male and female students of all ages, therefore they should learn proper lifting and spotting techniques from physical educators and coaches. If the guidelines presented in this article are followed, weight training can be safe and enjoyable for students.

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