Although much has been written by professionals about strength training guidelines for children (1), little has been offered regarding medical and legal considerations.

Strength and Conditioning professionals active in strength training programs for children need to thoroughly understand the potential legal problems when working with this age group. Injuries and even deaths (2) related to strength training activities among children, as well as claims and suits, do occur and with some frequency.

Screening children before they start strength training activities must be based upon physiological and psychological considerations unique to each age group. Cardiovascular diseases, pulmonary deficiencies or similar age-related conditions, while important, are usually secondary to cardiac abnormalities, maturation levels, musculoskeletal considerations and other age group ailments or diseases normally uncovered or assessed in a typical pre-participation physical.

Strength and conditioning professionals should also assess the appropriateness of strength training equipment, normally designed for adults, before prescribing exercises for children. Some exercise equipment may contribute to or cause needless injury.

Warnings related to equipment use may also have to be redefined and explained for children to ensure that they understand the potential risks associated with equipment use. Supervision of equipment use and other training activities should also be more intense. In addition, lower participant-trainer ratios may be necessary to meet the standard of care required for the proper supervision of children.

The use of waivers, releases or even assumption of risk documents for this age group may also be necessary. Anyone under 18 years of age cannot be bound to such contracts unless certain legal requirements are satisfied (e.g., the child is emancipated, or a probate court authorized the execution of such documents, etc.). Moreover, parents generally do not have the right to execute such waivers or contracts on behalf of their children so as to preclude a suit or claim for negligence filed on behalf of the child (3). As a consequence, many programs that provide strength training activities for this age group may be relegated to only providing relevant information, rather than seeking to free individuals from liability in the event of injury, claim or suit.

According to laws in many states, children of particular ages (generally 7-14 years) are incapable of self-negligence. As a consequence, in the event of injury and suit (even one caused or significantly contributed to by the negligence of a child in that age group), a child’s self-negligence will not be sufficient to bar or limit any award of damages for a strength and conditioning professional’s alleged negligence. Due to this principle, specific and on-going supervision of children is necessary from a professional and legal perspective.

Strength and conditioning professionals should also consider whether strength training of any kind is appropriate for younger children in some settings. It may be that some children are simply not ready to engage in certain activities such as strength training.

While this is a brief review of some of the principles applicable to strength training activities for children, professionals should always be aware of the principles and legal issues related to this age group. Remember, children must be treated with appropriate care, even in the weightroom.

References