Bridging the Gap

Strength Training is Ageless

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WEIGHT TRAINING AND strength conditioning are most often associated with body-builders, power lifters, and college and professional athletes. But it is also becoming increasingly popular for people in their 20s and 30s to join fitness centers and engage in weight training.

However, individuals at opposite ends of the age-group spectrum are rarely encouraged to become involved in strength conditioning. Youngsters are generally discouraged from weight training based on the misconception that their joints are too weak or that their immature physiology renders this type of conditioning ineffective. Surprisingly, a similar rationale is given to discourage elderly persons from weight training.

Yet I would encourage both groups to give lifting a try. Some of you may have teenagers you would like to take along to the gym, or better yet, your parents may want to tag along some time. In nearly all situations I would say, "bring them."

While surprisingly little research has been done on youths or on elderly persons with regard to weight training, that which has been done supports the involvement of both groups in weight training.

Concerning youngsters, the two biggest problems are lack of adult supervision and the fact that strength training equipment is built for adults.

Young people are eager to try new things, and injuries may occur if the lifting is not supervised by qualified adults. To stay on good terms with your gym owner, consult with him or her about any age restrictions or special concerns he/she may have. Also, remember that when some people come to the gym, they plan to enjoy a brief respite from their own kids, so a firm talk with your children about gym etiquette is advised.

The problem about equipment size is not so easily overcome. Nearly all equipment is built with a 6-ft male in mind. This has caused a great deal of trouble for women and is only now being addressed by equipment manufacturers. While there is some child-size equipment, the cost has kept it out of most gyms.

The argument is often made that children should just do pull-ups and push-ups and leave the weights alone. Oftentimes this is bad advice. It limits the child to his or her body weight, which may be too much for the shoulders and arms to handle. Therefore the use of dumbbells and light barbells may be more appropriate at first. Again, supervision is a key point.

Of course a parent or coach must use some good judgment, but I believe children 12 and older will benefit from learning to make strength training a lifelong activity.

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Older individuals are also eager to try new things, including weight training. Remember that weight training as we know it today has only been available to the general public since the 1960s. To our parents and grandparents this is all new.

With regard to quality of life, the elderly have the most to gain from becoming involved in a strength training program. Studies have shown increased flexibility, strength, and cardiovascular benefits from a well-planned weight training program for the elderly. However, the real benefit comes from the increased activity level in their everyday life. Many things we take for granted such as getting up from a chair or carrying a small package can drain the independence of daily life from the elderly.

Muscle mass in the elderly is diminished from inactivity, but the good news is that it will respond very quickly to a weight training program. Many activities formerly surrendered to age are no longer a problem.

I see very few special concerns when designing weight training for older persons, with the exception of using common sense and starting slowly. While a physician may have valid reasons for keeping an older person from weight training, being "just too old" is not one of them.

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**Column Editor's Note:**

Bridging the Gap is a column that will discuss some old ideas, new topics, and current trends from the viewpoint of a scientist and strength specialist. The goal of this column is to present material that is user friendly to coaches and athletes alike. If you have a topic you would like me to put my spin on, feel free to e-mail me at dpearson@bsu.edu