

STRENGTH TRAINING FOR YOUNG PLAYERS – THE RFU POSITION

There are many ideas on strength training for young players and the RFU has, over the years, put some of them forward. Most training concepts change with time and this is the most recent RFU statement on the subject, issued by Roy Headey, RFU Head of Sports Science & Medicine.

The Rugby Football Union believes that a competently planned and monitored strength training programme may assist in the prevention of injuries by preparing a young player for the rigours of modern day rugby, as well as improving performance due to increased strength, power and muscle endurance.

There is no evidence to suggest that the risk of injury associated with strength training in youth is greater than that associated with other recreational activities in which children and teenagers participate regularly.

RFU Head of Science and Medicine, Roy Headey, said, “Many misconceptions and fears exist concerning strength training for young people. However, published evidence suggests that strength training - of which weight training is one component - may in fact help reduce injuries, improve body composition and enhance overall sports performance.”

“For many young people, their normal, everyday lives do not prepare them physically for the demands of rugby at any level and strength training may decrease the risk of sports-related injuries. To play professional rugby by the age of 21, a player should have started a strength programme in his early teens, since, in order to compete in the professional game, a young player must often become bigger, nearly always stronger and definitely more resistant to injury through the use of a strength training programme.”

RFU position on strength training for young rugby players

Benefits

Peer-reviewed research indicates that strength training may be beneficial to young rugby players through

- the prevention of injuries,
- improved body composition and
- improved sports performance due to increased strength, power and muscular endurance.

Child Welfare

All children can participate safely in strength and conditioning programmes provided they

- have no obvious medical contra-indications,
- can demonstrate the ability to accept and respond to instruction,
- are supervised by suitably qualified personnel (e.g. BWLA Instructor, UKSCA accredited, minimum Level 2 Certificate in Coaching Strength & Conditioning) who have also received training in coaching or teaching children and have read the RFU's policy and procedures for the welfare of young people in rugby union. This is an absolute requirement for children under sixteen years of age,
- are supervised in facilities with adequate lighting, ventilation and space and with adequate accident and emergency procedures,
- use equipment that is appropriate for their age, size and experience and is checked regularly for any sign of wear and
- are given general warm-ups, cool-downs and rests and hydration breaks.

Equipment, Exercises and Volumes

- Strength training for children under seven years old could include body weight exercises (e.g. rope-climbing, push-ups, sit-ups etc), partner exercises (e.g. pushing and pulling games, relays involving carrying and throwing light medicine balls). They may be introduced to exercises using a limited range of safe equipment such as exercise balls and light medicine balls. As a general guide, such activities should take place twice a week for 10-15 minutes, be fun and be integrated with a well-organised play session.
- Children under seven years old should never train in facilities designed for adults nor use weights machines or free weights.
- Children from seven to ten years old may be introduced to simple exercises, such as lunges and step-ups, with child-sized barbells (or barbell substitutes such as broom handles or dowels) and dumbbells. They must be taught - and demonstrate that they have learned - the correct technique in all the exercises in the programme. No resistance should be applied until they can demonstrate correct form without additional weight. There must be a gradual, progressive and manageable increase in training volume. At this age, up to three sessions a week of around 15 minutes would be beneficial.
- Children from eleven years old upwards until twelve months after the adolescent growth spurt has started to slow down (on average around fifteen years old in boys) may add more complex exercise movements to their practice (e.g. squat, clean, snatch). Up until twelve months after the adolescent growth spurt has started to slow down, children should lift a weight that allows a minimum of six repetitions in good form. At this age, up to three sessions a week of around 30 minutes would be beneficial.

- Twelve months after the adolescent growth spurt has started to slow down, players may be introduced to more advanced programmes using a progressive increase in volume and intensity (resistance / weight applied). For young players of this age, who genuinely aspire to play elite level rugby, an introduction to such training programmes is essential, under the guidance and supervision of a qualified coach.

Background information:

What is “Strength Training” as compared with various other uses of weights for training or competition?

- **Strength training** – any form of conditioning designed to improve the trainee’s ability to exert or resist force, e.g. weight training, push-ups and other body weight exercises.
- **Resistance training** – as for strength training.
- **Power lifting** – a competitive sport comprising one repetition maximum lifts in bench-press, dead-lift and back-squat for athletes in different weight categories. The competitors are extremely strong – the men’s 75kg bench press record is 242.5kg. The event is a measure of maximal strength rather than power, since the movements are typically relatively slow.
- **Olympic lifting** – a competitive sport comprising one repetition maximum lifts in the snatch and the clean & jerk for athletes in different weight categories. These are a measure of power, since the movements are of necessity very fast.
- **Weight lifting** – a competitive sport comprising one repetition maximum lifts in a variety of different lifts for athletes in different weight categories, generally involving lifting and holding a loaded bar overhead.
- **Bodybuilding** – training that generally isolates individual muscle groups with the purpose of making them bigger and more prominent. In competitive bodybuilding, judgements are made solely on appearance.
- **Weight training** – using weights (free or machine) for the purpose of improving muscular strength and / or size.