Strength training for kids

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Properly supervised, age-appropriate strength training is safe for children and the research is clear about it — what is not safe is doing it without supervision, with equipment that can fall on a child, or by adding load before the movement is right. Peabody's Gym has 13 strength workouts and no barbell, dumbbell or bench anywhere in it.

The short answer

Children can safely get stronger, and the strength comes mostly from their nervous system learning to use the muscle they already have rather than from the muscle getting bigger. What the evidence keeps pointing at is the conditions: qualified supervision, equipment that cannot fall on them, and technique before load.

The National Strength and Conditioning Association's position statement is blunt about the first one — without qualified supervision, age-appropriate equipment and a safe environment, children should not do resistance exercise at all. A screen cannot supervise. That single sentence is why this Gym is built the way it is.

What we do instead

- No barbell, dumbbell, kettlebell, weight plate, bench or bar. The words are not in the data, so a future workout cannot reach for one.
- Load is a ball, a towel, a backpack with a book or two, or a part-full jug, from 3rd grade, and never described as a number of pounds.
- The lifting shapes are the real ones — squat, front squat, press, deadlift, high pull — so a child who later walks into a real gym arrives with the movements already right. That is the most useful thing this section can do for them.
- Nothing overhead with anything in the hands below 4th grade, and nothing anywhere that puts weight on a head or a neck.
- The two youngest levels have no clock to race. Intensity is the last thing added, not the first.

The strength workouts

- Workout: Push and Pull · Ages: 7 to 9 · Minutes: 10 · You need: nothing · What it is: Strength is your muscles pushing or pulling harder than they did last month.
- Workout: Plank Party · Ages: 7 to 9 · Minutes: 9 · You need: nothing · What it is: Holding still is work. Your middle is doing all of it.
- Workout: Bear Crawl Mountain · Ages: 9 to 12 · Minutes: 10 · You need: a wall · What it is: Going fast only counts when the shapes stay right.

• Workout: Ball and Back · Ages: 9 to 12 · Minutes: 14 · You need: a ball, a soft ball, a towel, a wall · What it is: Four shapes that every strong grown-up uses, learned with a ball.
• Workout: The Carry · Ages: 12 to 14 · Minutes: 15 · You need: a ball, a step, a wall, a backpack, two books · What it is: Carrying something a long way is the oldest kind of strong there is.
• Workout: Tummy and Back · Ages: 6 to 9 · Minutes: 10 · You need: a wall · What it is: Your middle goes all the way round: the front and the back both need a turn.
• Workout: Hang and Climb · Ages: 9 to 12 · Minutes: 11 · You need: a towel, a wall, a climbing frame · What it is: Hanging off things is the oldest exercise there is, and most people stop doing it at about nine.
• Workout: Throw and Chase · Ages: 7 to 9 · Minutes: 10 · You need: a ball, a soft ball, a towel, a wall · What it is: Throwing is a whole-body move: it starts at your feet and finishes at your fingers.
• Workout: Slam and Press · Ages: 9 to 12 · Minutes: 14 · You need: a ball, a soft ball, a towel, a wall · What it is: Power is strength and speed at the same moment, and it is trained both ways round.
• Workout: The Long Carry · Ages: 12 to 14 · Minutes: 12 · You need: a ball, a wall, a jug, a basket · What it is: Carrying something a long way without leaning is a whole workout on its own.
• Workout: Hold Still · Ages: 9 to 12 · Minutes: 14 · You need: a wall · What it is: Holding still is work. A muscle that is not moving can be working extremely hard.
• Workout: Bridge and Brace · Ages: 7 to 9 · Minutes: 10 · You need: a wall · What it is: The muscles that stop you wobbling are the ones nobody can see.
• Workout: Shoulders and Grip · Ages: 12 to 14 · Minutes: 11 · You need: a towel, a wall, a jug, a cushion, a climbing frame · What it is: Grip is the thing that gives out first, and almost nobody trains it on purpose.

How strength is actually built

Lifting something hard does not make a child stronger on the spot — it leaves the muscle slightly worse than it was an hour before. The rebuilding happens over the following day or two, mostly during sleep. So the work is the question and the rest is the answer, and training hard every day without resting keeps asking the question without letting the body answer it. The lesson is here.

Is this safe?

There is no barbell, dumbbell, kettlebell, bench or bar anywhere in the Gym — the words are not even in its data, so a future workout cannot reach for one. The heaviest thing a child ever picks up is a ball, a towel, or a backpack with a book or two in it, and only from 3rd grade; nothing goes overhead with anything in the hands below 4th grade, and nothing anywhere

puts weight on a head or a neck. The two youngest levels have no clock to race. Every workout that leaves the ground teaches landing first, in its own warm-up, and every workout page carries the same five stop signals — dizzy, chest hurts, can't catch your breath, a sharp pain in one spot, feeling sick — read aloud before any clock starts.

Why nothing here mentions weight

The Gym never mentions weight, shape, size or calories, and never suggests eating less. About sixty of those words are refused in the code itself, in every line a child reads, including the spoken ones. What it says instead is strong, fast, springy, steady and bendy — and that food is fuel.

Questions

At what age can a child start?

There is no minimum age in the research, but the useful test is whether a child can follow instructions and take the activity seriously. What changes with age is the load, not the movement — and in this Gym the movement comes years before any load at all.

Will it stunt their growth?

That is the old worry and the evidence does not support it. Growth-plate injuries come overwhelmingly from contact and high-momentum sport rather than from supervised resistance training. What does cause trouble is load before technique, which is the thing this Gym is designed to make impossible.

How often?

The physical activity guidelines ask for muscle-strengthening activity on at least three days a week for 6-to-17-year-olds, inside their hour a day. Climbing, carrying, crawling and hanging all count.

Where do these come from?

The way this section thinks about fitness — ten general physical skills, three ways to move, "do it right, do it right every time, then do it fast", and ending a session with a game — comes from CrossFit's published training model and its CrossFit Kids program. Peabody is not affiliated with them. The safety rules here are our own, and in several places stricter.

Nothing is sent anywhere

The Gym is free, with no ads and no sign-up. There is no camera, no pose detection and no leaderboard. What your child has done and their own best times stay on their own device and are never sent anywhere, so there is nothing to lose and no account to make.