

Why You Don't Need a Barbell to Make Kids Better Athletes

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The barbell is considered *the* essential implement in modern strength training.

And for good reason. The first written record of the barbell came in 1854 from French strong man and gym owner Hippolyte Triat. In the 160-plus years since, the barbell has proven to be an extremely potent tool for building strength, power and athleticism.

Today, it is used as the primary modality to load nearly all heavy squatting, hinging, pressing and pulling movements. I employ the barbell in the majority of the workouts I write, particularly for those seeking to improve strength. The load that can be placed on the body by way of the barbell is rivaled by few other implements, and I'm a firm believer in its power to change human bodies for the better.

With that said, we can not forget the fact that it's still just one tool among many. For novice or pre-teen athletes, in particular, our society is often too quick to overemphasize barbell movements and exercises at the expense of other training methods.

The myths about barbell training stunting growth appear to be entirely fiction, but just because kids *can* train with a barbell doesn't necessarily mean they should dedicate a ton of time to it.

To enhance the athleticism of young athletes, the primary focus should be toward establishing foundational movement patterns and increasing overall movement competency and literacy.

Building a base level of strength is no doubt important, as it underpins nearly all athletic endeavors. But the barbell is just one tool for building strength. Bodyweight movements and isometrics like Push-Ups, Pull-Ups, Chin-Ups, Inverted Rows, Glute Bridges, Lunges, Reverse Hyper Holds, etc., also build strength, and they may be a better fit for a youngster or novice.

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Young athletes should learn to squat, hip hinge, control pelvis position, press, pull and lunge with their body weight before loads are added. And even then, the next logical step is often a dumbbell rather than a barbell.

Barbells do not necessarily fit into the equation at the onset of training simply due to their weight and the manner in which loading occurs. A standard men's Olympic barbell weighs approximately 45 pounds, and for a youngster just learning to squat, that could be a relatively

large percentage of their body weight. Additionally, they either have to place the bar on their back or perform a Front Squat (or Zercher Squat) to use it. Personally, I believe getting them proficient in a loaded squat via a movement like the Dumbbell Goblet Squat is going to pay off with better mechanics and habits:

Additionally, young athletes crave vigorous, diverse movement. They need to skip, shuffle, hop, jump, climb, crawl and run. If these are being neglected because much of their training time is taken up by a barbell, it's likely to their long-term detriment. There's also a good chance they're not having much fun.

Due to [a lack of free play and the rise of early specialization](#), modern young athletes often lack well-rounded movement skills. Ask them to do seemingly simple things like run backwards, balance on one foot, or throw and catch a ball with their non-dominant hand, and it can give them [serious trouble](#).

Making their training look and feel more like play is essential if we want to overcome these issues, and the effort and enthusiasm this can elicit is unmatched. Kids generally like [playing tag](#) and running through [obstacle courses](#) more than they do barbell squatting and snatching. And that's totally fine!

Ultimately, the focus should be on making young athletes better overall movers and increasing their strength and proficiency in fundamental movements. And while the barbell can be one of many helpful tools to accomplish these goals, there's no reason to rush into it.

When the time is right, pairing these other methods with some smart, deliberate barbell training can set the athlete up for greater success once they hit their teenaged years and their bodies become more responsive to barbell-type training.

Below is a sample session for beginner trainees. It's certainly not comprehensive, and the sets and reps should be scaled appropriately, but it's meant to illustrate just some of the myriad possibilities for training athletes when a barbell is not the priority. The focus should be to start with primitive movement patterns and build a solid foundation before any progressions are to be made. If load is added, start with a light dumbbell and see how it impacts movement quality.

Sample Workout			
Movement Prep		Plyos & Agility (2x)	
Glute Bridges	12	Long Response Vertical Jump	10
Bird Dogs	8e	Snapdowns	10
Quadruped Knee Circles	10e	Line hops: Forward/Lateral/Split Stance	10e
Spiderman Stretch with rotation	5e	Wall Drills: Single leg knee drive, switch, continuous	10e leg
Leg Cradles	8e	Partner Mirror Drill	2x20s/e
Reverse Lunge with overhead reach	8e	Jump Rope	1min
Dynamic Movement		Circuit (3x)	
Jog Down, Backpedal back	Full gym length	Body Weight Squat	15
Jog to stop on one leg	every 5-6 steps, full gym length	Bi Lateral RDL ----> Single leg when ready	15e
Hip Hinge to Sumo Squat	10	TRX Rows	12
Marches, Bounds, Skips	Full gym length (2x)	Walking Lunges	8e
Side Shuffles	Full gym length (2x)	Side Lunges	8e
Suicide drill	Full gym length (2x)	Push Ups	10
Game		Cool Down	
Sharks & Minnows		Hip Flexor Stretch	30s/e
Round 1: 3 taggers to start	Tagged hold BW Squat in place	Bretzel Stretch	30s/e
Round 2: 4 taggers to start	Tagged stand and hop on one leg	Pigeon Stretch	30s/e
Round 3: 5 taggers to start	Tagged can only lunge to move	Downward Dog Stretch	1 min

There's not necessarily an "age" when this type of training should start, as it depends on the individual's physical, mental and emotional development. Let movement quality and motivation be your guide as to what drills/exercises make sense. And most importantly, make it fun!

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