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WE CAN WORK IT OUT: WEIGHT TRAINING WITH ADOLESCENTS

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Weight training is catching on. What was once the exclusive sport of musclebound meatheads is now as trendy as designer jeans. Men, women, children – everyone is pumping iron. And there are benefits behind the hype: regular workouts *do* increase strength, improve muscle tone and flexibility, and fine-tune the cardiovascular system.

This article, which is based on my experience with delinquent and abused teenage boys, looks at ways in which the youth worker can tap the benefits of weight training. It will be particularly useful to those workers who already have a basic understanding of weight training and who have either started to read about it or have spoken with staff at a health club or the "Y."

In the first half of the article, I will describe a few of the many ways that I have been able to enhance my work with weights. The second half will be devoted to basic tips for getting a weight program started.

Breaking the ice. Physical activity is a great way for worker and client to get acquainted. For this purpose, weight training has several advantages over other sports: it's popular, inexpensive, noncompetitive, allows for conversation, and does not require special skills.

The midas touch. Weight training can turn everything it touches into gold. Something as boring as "study skills" becomes more attractive when paired with weights or when weights are offered as a reward. Teenage boys, often threatened by self-help or therapy groups, are attracted to the "macho" weight training image, a fact I exploited in *Pumping Irons*, a program for delinquent boys which combined training in basic home skills, such as cooking and shopping, with weights.

Speaking out. Weights can be used to encourage emotional expression. Toby, 13, comes to mind. He did not like to let go of his pain and anger; his mother had just divorced his abusive father. Generally quiet in school, Toby had an explosive temper and had been in several fights with classmates. In the weight room, no matter how much his muscles ached, Toby kept his mouth shut. I explained that aches and pains were expected, and that it sure helped to make a little noise. Still he was si-

lent, his face turning red as he struggled for one more repetition. So, I took Toby to the "Y" where he could see well-developed weight lifters scream and grunt as they worked out. In our next session Toby began to make some noise and found those little grunts made the work easier. With this discovery as a reference point, we explored other ways Toby muzzled pain and encouraged him to let it out by talking.

On the track. Nigel was a compulsive thirteen-year-old with a train-load of unfocused energy; he spent much of his time tidying his spotless bedroom. In the gym he was likewise enthusiastic; when asked to do eight repetitions of an exercise, he'd do fifteen. I encouraged Nigel to stick to his limits, rewarding him on a point chart each time he stayed on target. In time, Nigel could regulate his own workouts and began experimenting with limit setting outside the gym.

This is just one example of how the gym can be used as a life-skills laboratory, a neutral setting where mistakes are of little consequence, and where a youth measures success with every pound he adds to the barbell.

Working to relax. I often use weights to enhance Progressive Relaxation Training (PRT). A system that maintains body tension increases anxiety; therefore, anxiety can be reduced once you learn to identify and control muscle tension. For example, the client clenches his/her fist for five seconds, then relaxes the hand while concentrating on the different sensations. I use weights to exaggerate these sensations. For example, Scott, a fifteen-year-old overachiever, quickly became frustrated with PRT because he could not feel the difference between tensed and relaxed muscles. I suggested he bench press 75 pounds (an easy weight for him) as many times as he could. As Scott struggled with his seventeenth repetition, I lifted the barbell and told Scott to relax. He sat for a moment, then smiled. "Now," he said, shaking his arms, "I feel a difference."

Weights are also useful in teaching youths effective breathing techniques, which are essential to relaxation. Weight training provides a context in which breathing can be naturally introduced. Cramped or exaggerated breaths inhibit the lifter, while deep, controlled breaths help. The same is true in relaxation, but teenagers are often reluctant to learn something that seems so simple when it's not in a useful context. Lisa, 16, shook her head at me as I tried to show her effective breathing. Finally she interrupted, "I'm not a *complete* idiot," she said. "I *do* know how to breathe."

These are just a few of the hidden benefits of a comprehensive weight training program. As you develop your own program, you should discover that there are many more.

Tips for Getting Started

Get some experience. Go to a spa or health club and practice weight training under the supervision of a pro. Take notes as they walk you through the exercises and ask as many questions as possible. When you feel comfortable with your way around the weights, then you can introduce it to others.

Consult a doctor. If you're at all uncertain about a child, get his/her doctor's approval before you start a weight program. While weight training is safe for most youths, a doctor may have concerns or suggestions for certain people.

Don't forget the emotional side. Does the youth have fears or anxieties which need to be addressed before weight training can begin? Many apparently competent teenagers are convinced they are too weak, or fat, or stupid to even try weight training. In cases such as these, consult the treatment plan, co-workers or the agency clinician.

Find a safe place. If you don't have a weight room or gym at the agency, supervised weight training rooms are usually the best place to go. To be safe, go there first and check it out.

If you have a weight room or plan to set one up, make sure you have the proper equipment and space. Equipment that isn't well-maintained is a hazard, as is a shortage of weights – weight trainers should not be forced to make big leaps in the amount of weight they are lifting because of lack of equipment. Weights should be properly stored and other sports equipment should not be lying around. The room should also be big enough so that lifters aren't on top of one another.

Set a baseline. Once you know a youth's health and safety are not in danger, it's time to begin the weight program. Start by setting baseline measures. Have the youth take a rough guess at how much s/he can bench press; how many curls s/he can do; the size of his/her shoulders, chest and other large muscles. Compare these guesses with actual results–starting out at minimal weights, gradually increasing until the youth reaches his/her maximum. Kids are often surprised with how they've underestimated themselves while others, of course, overestimate; this is a good exercise in reality testing.

Go slow and steady. Set a specific time for your weight training group, and then go at it at a pace which is comfortable for each group member. With slow but steady progress, they will be able to see results.

Use your best judgment. Some workers use weights as a matter-of-course with any effeminate boy they are trying to "dewimpify." Others use weights habitually, because they feel weight training has made a significant impact on their own lives. But weights, like any intervention strategy, should never be used out of habit, and no worker should ever coerce an unwilling child into using weights. With care, weight training is as effective and versatile as the youth worker who employs it. And after the fuss has died down and the popular imagination has moved on to hula-hoops and yo-yos, weight training will remain a potent tool. Likewise, as your relationship with a client fades, weights can remain, an enduring gift to physical health and its emotional benefits.