I am going to begin this article by summing it up… "You Can't Build A Champion Before You Build An Athlete!" This is the premise behind effective, wrestling–specific training for wrestlers aged 6-13. Let me explain…

Typically, young wrestlers (as well as other young athletes) are trained in a fashion that is actually a 'dumbied-down' version of how older, more experienced wrestlers are trained. They go through similar practices, drilling, and conditioning as the older wrestlers do.

I'd like to give some insight as to why this is not the best way to go about it. This is because young wrestlers are in a completely different phase of growth and maturity than older wrestlers. Young wrestlers have unique needs that need to be addressed differently than older wrestlers. When done properly, you will develop a better wrestler in the short-term and long-term. Here are some tips to consider when working with young wrestlers.

1. Increase Mobility/Flexibility

A young wrestler needs to keep flexibility. By addressing this when they are in a developmental stage of life, you ensure full movement patterns that will stay with them for the rest of their wrestling career, as well as the rest of their adult life. But I'm not talking about static stretching… the kind where you hold a stretch for 20-30 seconds. These are good AFTER practice. What I'm referring to are more dynamic stretches… stretches that require movement or 'loosening up.' Some great examples of mobility exercises for youth wrestlers are:

Hip Circuits
Leg Raises
Ankle Mobs
Modified Overhead Squat

2. Activate the Core

Most wrestling practices involve sit-ups and crunches at some point. Having a strong mid-section is essential to success in wrestling, as well as most other sports. We typically see wrestlers train the abs by hooking their feet under something or have a partner hold their ankles as they 'crank out' as many as possible, as fast as possible. This is not only less-effective (for any athletes) but is potentially dangerous. There is a tremendous amount of torque placed on the psoas muscles which run from the pelvis bone to the vertebrae of the back. Many 'back problems' later in life are caused by training the abs in this fashion.

The young wrestler can still do crunches (we never do sit-ups) with the following guidelines:

Train them more slowly, holding each repetition at the top (the contracted position) for a couple of seconds.

Never have someone or something support the ankles. As mentioned, this is terrible for the lower back. The hip flexors, which are stronger than the abs take over when the ankles are supported, lessening the direct muscular stimulus on the abdominal muscles.

The better approach to successful core conditioning for young wrestlers is core activation, where we do static (non-movement) core training. Some great examples of static core exercises are:

Bridges
Planks
Side Raises

3. Train Systemic Strength

Strength training for youth wrestlers needs to be different than for older wrestlers. Absolute strength training with weights and machines is not effective for the younger wrestler. The body of the youth wrestler cannot adapt to the demands of weight lifting in a strength-building sense. It is far better at this point of growth and development to concentrate on strength training with bodyweight-movement patterns. Many of these exercises require the young wrestler to move across the mat. An exception to this is squatting movements with one leg. Some great systemic strength training exercises for youth wrestlers are:

Walking Pushups
Single Leg Squats
Crab Walks
Bear Crawls
Lunge Walks

4. Teach Skills Bilaterally

In order to develop the best wrestler you must develop a total athlete, as I mentioned. You should always teach wrestling moves in a bilateral sense. This means you should always teach your young wrestlers to use both sides of the body. When teaching a single leg takedown, always have them shoot on both legs. When teaching moves from the top, have them start on both sides of their opponent in practice. When teaching a standup, teach them to take the first step with one leg, and then the other. You get the idea… it's all about not patterning them too much with using a preferred side of the body. This is fine when they are in a match… but in order to develop them fully in the long run, teach both sides as often as possible.

5. Make It Fun

Sometimes as coaches and parents we forget the big picture. Training youth wrestlers should always be fun, for the wrestlers as well as the coaches and parents. When planning wrestling practice, try to use obstacle courses when possible. This allows you to train the biomechanical skills necessary for overall athletic development, while giving the wrestlers a stimulating, exciting experience.

When trained properly, youth wrestlers will become better wrestlers immediately, but more importantly will be better in the long run. They will become better overall athletes, which in turn improves mat performance. They will also incur less injuries during their wrestling career. The most important facet to proper youth wrestler training is you will prevent burnout. Kids learn better when they're having fun.

Editor's Note: *Steve Preston is a Sports Performance Specialist who works exclusively with wrestlers for improved mat performance. His membership site for wrestlers, coaches and parents is www.wrestlingperformance.com. To get a free copy of his '63 Strength, Conditioning and Nutrition Tips for Wrestlers!' ebook, go to: www.wrestlingconditioningtips.com.*