

The Running Life: Well Schooled

What Running Can Teach Our Children

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Did you win? These were the words that greeted me when I returned home after running my very first road race in 1989.

My children, then ages 4 and 7, met me at the door, clearly expecting me to be toting some serious hardware. When they saw that my only possessions were a bib number and a damp towel, they went back to their Saturday morning cereal and cartoons. Seizing upon a classic teaching opportunity, those all too infrequent parental tools, I tried to explain to them that "winning" was a fluid concept, one that did not always involve coming in first. That morning my children and I talked about setting goals, taking good care of your body, enjoying the outdoors, and making new friends—some of the things that running had helped me accomplish.

My children are now grown, living lives very different from my own. They have become strong, intelligent, independent adults any parent would be proud of. I credit most of their success as individuals to some happy combination of their own hard work and a generous helping of dumb luck. In addition, I would like to think that conscientious parenting played a small part in the way they turned out. Throughout the years, I have discovered that my parenting skills were enhanced by lessons I learned as a runner.

Running has allowed me, over and over again, to teach by example, starting with my first race. In that first heady, falling-in-love year that I started running, I trained by myself. Almost every weekend I would wake up before anyone else in the house even thought about stirring, and I would drive to a race. Racing allowed me to put my nascent athletic skills to the test. It gave me a social context in which to place my newly discovered passion. And it provided me with a concrete indicator of my progress.

Over the course of that first year, I transformed myself. As I became more fit, I had more energy. When I carved out an hour a day to devote to running, I became more generous with my time. At work I was more focused and better organized. At home I was less cranky and more available. I morphed from soft and pudgy to firm and sleek. I ate better and was sick less. I was a runner.

This transformation was not lost on my children. They were the major beneficiaries of my lifestyle change. As my level of physical activity increased, theirs did too. Instead of watching videos or playing computer games, on nice days we would head to the playground or off on a bike ride. I became the go-to Mom for trips to hike along the towpath or play dates at the kids' gym. One time I was hanging upside down by my knees on the monkey bars at the park. One of my daughter's friends climbed up until we were very close, and he whispered uncertainly, "Are you a big kid or a little mommy?"

As beneficial as running was for me and my family, it wasn't always perfect. My personality and my inclinations practically guaranteed that not long after I became a runner, I would be lured by the Siren song of the marathon. With small children, a full time job, and marathon training, my plate was beyond full—it was spilling onto the table and making a big mess. If I were going to be a marathoner, I would have to do some serious soul searching and even more serious negotiating with my family. Again, running provided me with one more choice teaching opportunity, not only for my children but also for myself.

We talked about what I would need to do in order to prepare properly for the race. They helped me choose which marathon I would run. We charted my training schedule, and they helped me keep track of my progress. My schedule hung in the kitchen next to their list of chores. We gave each other gold stars and encouragement for our progress as the weeks passed. They helped me stick to an eating plan and joined me as I made healthy snacks for all of us. They even created a running mantra for me, one I could repeat to myself when I got tired or felt like stopping: "Good luck, have fun, run, run, run." To this day, this is the phrase I chant to myself whenever I start to flag during a race or a long run. It inevitably gives me the boost I need to keep going.

Although they slept through most of my weekday training, they found it difficult to give up any of our time together for my weekend long runs. I tried to make these as early as possible, but this was one area that was always just a little bit tender and would continue to be until they were well into high school. It was during this time of compromise that I realized the learning opportunities presented by running worked both ways. In trying to balance the concepts of family time and alone time, I had to carefully assess my own issues and expectations, not just once but for as long as my children were living with me.

As they grew older, I hoped that one or both of my children might become runners as well. Though I tried not to push an athletic agenda, I secretly harbored the fantasy of running with my child, having one of those amazing conversations that seem to happen only on a run. It never happened. Both of them have taken up running in college, but only as a means to keep fit. They would never describe themselves as runners.

But I think if you asked them, they would admit that their lives had been shaped and enriched by running and the lessons they have learned from the running life.

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