

Young Runners

How to Balance the Rewards and Risks of Children Running

By Candace Karu

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We are runners. We love to run. Who among us has not happily shared this love with friends, family and even the occasional stranger? It is no wonder, then, that parents who run would want to share their passion with their children.

This desire is more complicated than passing on an interest in great literature, photography, ikebana or major league baseball. Running, the kind of running that is such an important part of our lives, is not for the faint of heart, mind or constitution—no matter what age.

As a sport, running offers adults a host of rewards and benefits. As a direct result of their habit, adult runners can count on cardiovascular health, aerobic conditioning, strong leg muscles, dense bones and a reduced risk of a variety of diseases, not to mention the psychological benefits. Unfortunately, most runners can also, almost certainly, experience one or more running-related injuries over the course of their careers on the roads and trails.

Children can also reap tremendous benefits from running. Whether as part of cross country or track team training, as part of a regular fitness program, as preparation for other team sports, or simply as play, running is a healthy, inexpensive, engaging activity that promotes fitness and discipline in children of all ages. With that in mind, it is also important to recognize the pitfalls of a regular running program for young people. If parents, coaches and teachers do not carefully supervise and guide young runners, there is a real possibility for damage, both physical and psychological. It is up to parents to monitor a child's progress and to anticipate problem areas. With help from coaches and doctors and with a healthy dose of common sense, we can start our children on the road to a lifetime of running.



Lead by Example

Most children run all the time. They run when they play tag and tee ball. They run to the cookie jar and away from the bathtub. After the first few weeks or months of the "drunken sailor" steps of a baby learning to walk, running is next on the agenda. Once started, most kids don't want to stop. In many children, running continues to be an important part of their daily routine. Given the alarming statistics of sedentary youngsters and the distractions of television, computers and video games, activity of any kind should be encouraged and reinforced as soon as a child is on her feet.

A family, one where each person is active both individually and with other family members, is the perfect environment to teach children about the benefits of running. Children whose parents are committed to health and fitness are much more likely to become healthy, fit adults themselves. And children who see running as one part of a well-rounded, active lifestyle are more likely to become lifelong runners.



Betsy Kempter, mother, preschool teacher, and former nationally ranked distance runner, coaches children for the Chapel Hill/Carrboro Pacers, a running club in Chapel Hill, NC that has been in existence since the 1970's. Kempter, who graduated from Brown in 1988 and received her Masters degree in Physiology in 1996, is that rare creature, a runner who has competed successfully since she was nine and who still loves to run. Her coaching duties allow her to instill her enthusiasm and love of the sport in the next generation of runners.

Kempter's description of the Pacers and its programs brings to mind the running clubs of Europe and Australia. The Pacers have a large and diverse number of programs and participants. There is an emphasis on family participation. And, unlike many running clubs in this country, the Pacers have a well-designed, comprehensive children's program that encourages and supports young runners of all abilities.

Kempter, who has competed at every level from the Junior Olympics to the Olympic marathon trials, has very clear ideas about children and running: "Of the kids I ran with as a child, almost none were still running by high school or college." The burn-out rate for pre-teen runners is staggering. Kempter attributes this to a common misconception among coaches of younger athletes. "The mistake they make is treating children like little adults. Not many kids want to go to the track and run quarters."

Coaching children takes an entirely different approach. She believes that the key to keeping kids running is flexibility. Coaches and parents must have the ability to keep the spontaneity and joy alive, while teaching young runners skills and encouraging commitment.

This seems to be the hallmark of the Pacers children's program. The surrounding area is blessed with miles of well-maintained trails

that are the perfect place to start kids off right. The soft running surface does not place undue stress on growing bodies. And in a world where it is often unsafe to ride a bike to school, "running the trails gives the younger Pacers the freedom to run wild and free in the woods and channel their energy in a positive way," says Kempter.

The Pacer's do not get kids involved in a running program for the sole purpose of competition. Although they do work with a few children who will eventually compete at the Junior Olympic level, half the kids don't ever compete, according to Kempter. The emphasis on external rewards is also minimized. It is rarely important in their workouts which child comes in first. "The Pacers will never press a kid beyond his ability or desire," says Kempter emphatically.

Team Players

As young runners get to middle school and high school, opportunities for running with a team begin to open up. These students might also run as part of conditioning for other sports. Most children who participate in team sports in school play more than one sport. "It's the rare child who just runs," says Kempter. "Most of our kids play soccer or other sports too." As beneficial as team sports can be in the physical and emotional development of teenagers, there are real pitfalls that parents of young athletes should be aware of.

John Babington, head coach of the Wellesley College cross country team and former coach of the Liberty Athletic Club, no longer coaches younger runners, because he says he was "uncertain that what we were doing was good for them." Babington feels that young runners often run to please others more than themselves. He refers to the "Little League Syndrome" in which, whether knowingly or not, parents exert undue pressure on kids to excel at all costs and children are motivated to achieve for the attention and validation from a parent rather than for the satisfaction of their own accomplishments. His advice for preteen runners—"Keep it low-key and keep it fun."

As for parents of children running middle school or high school cross country or track, Babington cautions them to be supportive but not overly involved in their child's training. He acknowledges that this might be hard for a parent who is an avid runner himself. "Sometimes the best parents are the ones who don't know a doggone thing about running. It can be a blessing for everyone." He encourages parents to have faith in the coaching their child receives. Even if they disagree with the coach, Babington cautions parents to "bite your tongue and leave your kid to be educated by the program." He also advises parents who have questions, suggestions or criticisms to take them up directly with the coach and not with the child.

Kim Moody-Roberts, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Nursing at the University of Southern Maine, a two-time Olympic Marathon Trials runner and the mother of 13-year-old twins, Stanis and Elise. Both Moody-Roberts's children are extremely active, with after-school activities that include competitive skiing, swimming and running. Since both of their parents are gifted athletes, it is no wonder that Stanis and Elise love their active lifestyle. "We have always taken them with us," explains Moody-Roberts. "We go camping, hiking, trail running, skiing—all as a family. We try to make family outings fun, downplaying any competitive aspects."

Dr. Moody-Roberts believes that in order to keep a teenage athlete strong and healthy, both mentally and physically, parents should focus on what the child wants and what their motivations might be. She echoes Babington's concern that it is not unusual for a child to seek attention from a parent by excelling at sports. This is a dangerous path to be avoided at all costs. "The teenage years are a very vulnerable age both physically and emotionally," cautions Moody-Roberts. "We need to be careful not to push a child beyond his or her mental or physical limits."

Dr. Moody Roberts points out a few danger signs associated with an unhealthy drive in young athletes:

Negative self-statements: Pay attention when your child says "I'm not good enough" or "I'm too fat and slow," instead of more positive statements like "I know I can get better" or "I'm going to concentrate on eating better."

Loss of appetite: Building bone and muscle mass takes a lot of fuel. Not only should young athletes be eating healthy foods, they should be enjoying meals and mealtime.

Dropping out of their existing social circles: This is a real red flag for kids who are feeling pressured.

Keeping the Strength

Much more than their adult counterparts, young runners are at great risk of injury. Unless properly trained and supervised, these athletes can stress their bodies to a point that makes running impossible. Chronic, long-term problems can be the result for a child who over-trains or who is given uniformed or inaccurate coaching.

Warning Signs of Too Much Sports

The Athlete:

- Is tense, moody and irritable almost all the time, especially around practice and game times.
- Is doing badly academically.
- Pursues almost no other activities besides sports (no painting, singing, journalism).
- Has little time to relax or see friends.
- Is primarily focused on improving his athletic skills and has little time for participating in or serving the community around him.
- Treats games as an obligation rather than fun.
- Is reluctant to go to games or practice.
- Is exhausted during the school day.

Sidebar excerpted from *The Young Athlete*, by Jordan D. Metz, M.D. with Carol Shookhoff (Little, Brown and Company, 2002).

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—Athlete and Coach Betsy Kempter

The very act of growing puts unique strains on a child's body. Bones grow at a faster rate than the muscles that attach to them, thus, during times of growth, a young runner's muscles and tendons are being stretched to accommodate the growing bones, so putting further stress on them by over-training can lead to muscle strain, tendinitis and even stress fractures.

Though fairly common in competitive younger athletes, most over-use injuries could be easily avoided with a comprehensive program of strength training and stretching. Even very young runners can benefit from a consistent routine of resistance training, including multiple repetitions of light weight lifting, core strength training, push-ups, abdominal crunches and other similar exercises. This kind of strengthening and muscle building work should be a regular part of a young athlete's training regimen, both on and off-season.

The discipline of ongoing strength training will serve a young athlete throughout her lifetime. Parents can also play an important role in this area. Taking a half-hour out of a busy day to work out with a child can serve several purposes: not only can this time be used for catching up on the day's activities, it is also a great way to make an otherwise boring workout fly by.

Stretching, too, can be a bonding as well as a beneficial activity. There are a number of excellent video stretching workouts that parents and children can do together. Partner stretching can also help keep both of you flexible and fit.

Becoming part of your child's support system can be a situation where everyone comes out a winner. Both of you get the benefits of strengthening and stretching. You are helping your child build lifelong habits that will promote strong muscles and help prevent future injuries and your child has the opportunity for one-on-one time with his parent.

Food to Grow On

A growing athlete needs constant fueling. Three healthy, balanced meals with several snacks throughout the day are essential to keeping young runners strong and fit. With that in mind, it is also important to remember that children, like adults, come in myriad shapes and sizes. Some children will remain whippet thin throughout their lives no matter what they eat. Likewise, there will be young athletes who struggle to keep the pounds off, even though they have sensible eating habits.

According to Dr. Moody-Roberts, parents should look at their child's growth trajectory and pay attention to any sudden weight gain or loss. "In middle school many kids will begin to lose their baby fat, which is normal," says Moody-Roberts. "But they should still be very hungry and eating appropriately if they are participating in sports." Parents should be concerned if there are drastic changes in their child's weight.

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—Dr. Kim Moody-Roberts

Of course, young athletes should have lots of healthy foods and snacks available to them, at least at home. Often the school cafeteria can be a young runner's worst enemy if he's trying to make good, sensible food choices. Help make his job easier by helping him pack foods that will support a commitment to eating right. Dr. Moody-Roberts reminds us that it's never too late for families to change bad eating habits or to improve mediocre ones. Eating healthy, balanced meals and snacks at home can help form a child's tastes later in life. It will also help mitigate the junk foods and empty calories he'll invariably encounter outside his home.

Running for Life

Parents can support young runners in many ways. First and foremost, parents should create a home environment where children feel safe and supported in all their endeavors. Parents can be role models and mentors, while allowing their children the freedom to explore a variety of sports that suit them. Sharing the joys of a healthy body and mind can be one of the greatest gifts a parent can give to a child. Running may not become a young athlete's primary sport in middle and high school, but with luck and guidance, a parent and child will still be able to share decades of miles together.

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