

Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

Children and Running



YOU KNOW IT'S IMPORTANT TO HELP your kids develop the exercise habit so they can grow to be healthy, active adults. So, if your children have expressed an interest in running or a desire to participate in a race or two, don't discourage them! Running is a great natural sport that requires very little equipment. The important thing is to let them determine their own pace and to run only if it's fun and enjoyable.

A Few Precautions Before Getting Started

Check with a physician to rule out any physical limitations that may prevent your child from participating in a running program. Keep in mind that children's bodies, although young and energetic, are not capable of performing at the same level as an adult's. For example, kids are more sensitive to heat, so it is essential that they drink plenty of water and avoid running in the heat of the day. "Children have a higher body mass to skin surface ratio and may not be able to dissipate heat as well as adults," says Dr. Gabe Mirkin, a board-certified specialist in sports medicine and pediatrics.

Although children's bodies are more flexible than most adults, always have them begin a walk or run slowly to get the muscles warm and ready to run. Once the muscles begin to heat up, it is OK to begin running. Also, show them how to stretch their calves, hip flexors and hamstrings after cooling down at the end of each run.

Finding Their Form

Since running is a natural action, most children will develop their own form. Encourage your child to relax his or her hands and face while running. A scrunched face and clenched fists indicate tension, which usually means the intensity is too high and the child is straining rather than having fun. Like adults, kids should be able to carry on a conversation while running and should be able to smile. Urge them to slow down if necessary and keep their shoulders relaxed while steadily and smoothly swinging their arms.

To avoid slapping their feet on the ground, have children imagine running on light feet. For example,

rather than pounding like a herd of elephants, tell them to run as if they are angels running on clouds or tigers running very lightly so they don't scare their prey.

How Far Should They Go?

Children will gauge their own limitations, so always listen when they say it's time to stop. Children should run only as far as they are comfortable. Lyle Mitcheli, M.D., director of the Division of Sports Medicine at Children's Hospital in Boston, recommends that children under the age of 14 run no farther than 3 miles at a time. The reason, he says, is that bones are still growing and the growth cartilage at the ends of the bones is softer than adult cartilage and more vulnerable to injury.

Don't put pressure on your child to run. Encourage kids to come with you on short runs, but keep the pace slow enough that they can talk to you, and stop when they are tired. Kids should not begin running races above 5 kilometers (3.1 miles) until they are at least of high school age. Most marathons will not allow athletes under the age of 18 to enter due to possible skeletal injuries.

Although running requires minimal equipment, it is important to invest in some supportive running shoes for your children. Look for a high-quality shoe that is made for running, with proper cushioning in the forefoot and heel as well as arch support. Depending on how often your child runs, replace running shoes as soon as they show signs of breakdown, which usually occurs after about three months.

Set Attainable Goals

For children, the goal of running is to stay in shape and have fun, with a greater emphasis on the fun. Running fast or winning races is less important and may cause children to dislike exercise or abandon it altogether. Focus instead on improving your children's self-esteem by praising their efforts and helping them reach their goals. Chances are that if they enjoy running and feel a sense of pride when they are finished, they will remain active for life.

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