

fit body



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RUNNING WITH THE KIDS

Strengthens Body, Mind and Family Spirit

by Marlaina Donato

Combining regular exercise with quality family time can be an enjoyable and fun way to realize a healthier lifestyle. Running together in fresh air, preferably in natural settings, allows children as young as 5 to safely join in.

Physical and Emotional Perks

Families and coaches agree that running benefits both body and psyche. “Running as a family is an incredibly bonding experience, putting aside some of the usual conflicts and perceived hierarchies and just coming together,” says William Pullen, a London, England, psychotherapist and author of *Running with Mindfulness: Dynamic Running Therapy (DRT) to Improve Low-mood, Anxiety, Stress, and Depression*. “Running also gives us a place where we can develop skills like building confidence and competency.”

Marc Bloom, of Princeton, New Jersey, author of *Young Runners: The Complete Guide to Healthy Running for Kids From 5 to 18* and *The Runner’s Bible*, concurs, stating, “Running as a family can give parents the opportunity to be good role models by instilling values of health, fitness and togetherness.”

Experts emphasize the fun factor. Pullen encourages both parents and kids to get out of their heads and into their bodies. “Concentrating on breath, posture, sensation and location all help make running mindful,” he suggests.

“The important thing is to show up. It’s about participation, not breaking personal bests,” Pullen continues. Kids can play a game while running, such as silently counting steps, trees or other runners.” Mindfulness can also include sharing how it feels to run and meeting challenges along the way.

Bloom suggests tuning in to nature. “Being in beautiful surroundings or watching for animals can promote mindfulness,” he says. “It can be spiritual.”

Safe Start

For beginners, experts recommend approaching running as a desirable pastime and adopting a slow, easy pace. “Always make running fun, not a chore,” encourages Bloom. “Frame it as being outside, playing and sharing with friends and family. Make a game of it as much as possible.”

Whether a family chooses to run in the park or in a community race, experts stress the importance of not setting goals. “Make it pleasurable. Don’t worry about time and distance. Start with short distances, maybe a block or two for novice runners or very young children,” advises running coach Jeremy Sanders, from Winchester, Virginia. “Be patient. Some days, the kids will get cramps. They may whine or get moody. Other days, they will be happy and content. Don’t let one bad run ruin the opportunity to try again another time.”

Running coaches and seasoned runners agree that it is wise to tailor runs according to age and fitness levels. “Kids can begin at school age, 5 or 6; but start them with a few minutes and then add more, up to 15 minutes to a half an hour or so a few days a week. Always mix in sprints for short attention spans. Keep it simple. No fancy running shoes are needed when starting, just regular sneakers,” advises Bloom. “For teens, 30 to 45 minutes at a time a few times a week is fine, provided that they have bona fide running shoes.”

Inspiration

Finding inspiration as a family can include running for worthy causes; most communities host charity runs. “This can become a focal point for getting in shape, raising money and running for the greater good, not just yourself,” says Bloom.

Mindful running presents regular opportunities to explore new places, focus on details that often go unnoticed and make exercise an active meditation for all involved. “Show kids how to notice what is going on around them when they run,” suggests Pullen. “You can read up and educate yourselves on trees, geology or the change of seasons so they feel a powerful sense of connection and freedom.”

Whether running as a family is motivated by a desire to stay fit, get someplace or simply share more quality time, being in the present moment is most important. “Life is not about striving all the time,” exhorts Pullen. “Take the kids out. Keep it fun and make it into an adventure.”

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Breathing While Running

William Pullen: “Mindful breathing is simply making the observation of one’s breath being the priority over thoughts. Each time the mind interrupts, gently return to the breath. Learning how to do that gently is what it’s all about—it means letting go of forcing, wishing and striving—and just gently doing.”

Marc Bloom: “I’m not a fan of instructing young kids how to breathe while running because thinking about a must-do task can spoil the fun, and also seem like homework. Runners breathe naturally through their mouths, with an occasional deep breath through the nose. You can get technical with this, but not for kids. Be aware if breathing gets labored. If kids feel out of breath they’re probably running too fast. Kids love to start off fast, often too fast. Also, normal breathing might feel ‘out of breath’ and wrong to them because they’re not accustomed to it. Explain this to newbies beforehand by telling them what to expect.”

Jeremy Sanders: “Everyone is different. Your breathing changes with effort and the more you run, the more you learn what works for you. You can experiment by breathing through only your nose or only your mouth, or in combination, in through the nose and out through the mouth. You can also alter the number of steps between each breath to get a comfortable rhythm going.”