



FUNdamentals of Youth Running

The Road Runners Club of America promotes the following guidelines for youth running. These guidelines are based on the 10 developmental principles that guide training and racing for young distance runners outlined in the book *Training for Young Distance Runners* written by Larry Greene, PhD and Russ Pate, PhD, and published by Human Kinetics.

- **Make running fun.** First and foremost, running should be fun. Do not use running as a punishment. Encourage children to participate and try their best.
- **Emphasize good technique.** Teach youth good form early and help eliminate bad habits such as excessive arm movement, twisting of the upper body, or over striding.
- **Focus on participation and self-improvement.** In elementary school, running should be about participation and developing a healthy lifestyle, not about being the fastest kid in the school or program. Save competition for middle and high school aged students.
- **Consider individual differences.** Avoid a one-size-fits-all running program. Accommodate for differences in abilities within the group. Children mature both physically and emotionally at different rates, and this will factor into their ability to participate in running.
- **Limit systematic training and competition before puberty.** Before puberty children are rapidly growing and changing. Excessive, systematic training may interfere with normal growth and cause injury in a child. Between the ages of 3 and 9, encourage regular exercise, which can include organized running for fun as outlined in the *Kids Run the Nation Program Guide for Teachers, Coaches, and Program Directors*. Around the age of 8 to 12, children may enjoy participation in a more organized running program that has a more systematic training environment that lasts two to three months. Around the age of 12 for girls and 14 for boys, key developmental changes will enable students to slowly increase training distance and duration leading to participation in a systematic and competitive training environment.
- **Increase running workload gradually.** Running workload includes volume (distance), intensity (speed or effort), and frequency (number of days a week). Just like with adults' running training, children should start a running program with a low-volume, low-intensity plan and limit frequency to a couple of days per week. Workload should increase over the duration of the program, but should remain appropriate for the individual runner.
- **Participate in age appropriate running events.** Running in a kid's fun run or youth track event can be a great experience for kids. For children 5 and under focus on "dash" events that range from a few yards to 400 meters. For children 5 and over, kids fun runs that are a ½ to 1 mile long may be considered, but allow for a combination of running and walking. Children ages 12 and over may want to participate in a 5K run. Children ages 15 and older may want to participate in a 10K to half marathon event. Children 18 and older may want to participate in a marathon or further distance. These are general guidelines and the distance a child can physically and emotionally tolerate will depend on the individual, however longer distances (10K and over) should wait until after puberty.