

FUNDAMENTALS OF YOUTH RUNNING



The RRCA promotes the following guidelines for youth running:

- **Make running fun.** First and foremost, running should be fun. Encourage children to participate and try their best. Never use running as a punishment.
- **Emphasize good technique.** Teach youth good form early and help eliminate bad habits such as excessive arm movement, upper body twisting, 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 school- and high school-aged students.
- **Consider individual differences.** Avoid a one-size-fits-all running program. Accommodate differences in abilities within the group. Children mature physically and emotionally at different rates, and this factors into their ability to participate in running.
- **Limit systematic training and competition before puberty.** Before puberty, children are growing and changing rapidly. Excessive, systematic training may interfere with a child's normal growth and cause injury. Between ages 3 and 9, encourage regular exercise, which can include organized running for fun as outlined in this guide. Around ages 8-12, children may enjoy participation in a more organized running program in a systematic training environment that lasts 2-3 months. Around age 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 the running workload gradually.** The running workload includes volume (distance), intensity (speed or effort), and frequency (number of days per week). Just as with adults' running training, children should start a running program with a low-volume, low-intensity plan and limited frequency of 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 kids' 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 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. Young adults 18 and older may want to participate in a marathon or greater distance. These are general guidelines. The distance a child can physically and emotionally tolerate depends on the individual; however, longer distances (10k and over) should wait until after puberty.

These guidelines are based on the 10 developmental principles that guide training and racing for young distance runners in Training for Youth Distance Runners by Larry Greene, PhD and Russ Pate, PhD.

For a printable version of the FUNDamentals of Youth Running, visit www.rrca.org/programs/kids-run-the-nation/fundamentals-of-youth-running.