

Getting Kids Running... The Right Way



Words by Mike Antoniadis

If you believe running enhances your life, it's only natural to want to pass your passion for the sport onto your children. But, as The Running School's Mike Antoniadis says, there's a lot more to teaching your kids about running than just taking them out on one of your regular sessions...

You come in after a 30 minute run, that seemed to last the best part of the day. You look like something the cat dragged in, knees and back aching, lungs burning, feet on fire. The next thing you know the kids are tugging your arm shouting, "Can I come with you and run next time? Please, please, I can do it, its easy!". Sound familiar?

And perhaps you think, 'Yes, it would be good to get the kids into running. It'll be great for them to get some time away from the TV & computer screen if nothing else (not to mention hopefully wearing them out so they'll go to sleep earlier).' Oh and then there's Sports Day coming-up and you don't want them coming in last in the egg and spoon race!

The Wobbles

So, next time you go out you take them with you to the park and watch them shuffle along the ground just like you with occasional bursts of speed, arms flailing like an octopus, just like you, co-ordination all over the place. It's going great, for about three minutes, and then they start saying they're tired and have had enough. Already! This is no good, you don't want them to get in the habit of giving up too soon. So, you begin the advice. "You can't be tired already, try and keep going just a bit more," you say. And then it's, "No! Not like that... Faster... Stop swinging from side to side... No! Stop thumping the ground..."

Your instinct as a parent is correct. Our kids do spend too much time sitting on their backsides every day, watching television, on the internet, playing computer games, in class, being driven around. This is

changing their biomechanics - the way they move and the way they hold themselves - and even their moods and ability to concentrate. Children's bodies should get two to three hours of exercise every day. Sadly, few get even 30 minutes per day. So, running is a good habit for them to pick-up early in life.

But, stop and think for a moment, who taught you to run? Chances are, nobody did. You just got up and ran.

Getting it Right From the Start

You might have read advice and tips in magazines, books, or on the net, probably centred around volume of training, frequency of training, running clubs, shoes, clothes, heart rate monitors, etc. But it's unlikely you'll have come across anything that has really helped you develop and improve your technique.

Most of the injuries runners get are because of landing shock. The running style that many novice runners and even seasoned recreational runners adopt tends to be very inefficient and causes stresses and strains on the body. I believe this is the reason the majority of runners, about 65%, get injured every year - and the numbers are much higher when they enter a race and start increasing the volume or intensity of their running.

To avoid this we need to be taught the proper techniques of good running. You can buy all the expensive shoes, clothes and gadgets you want, but without learning the right running technique it's almost like buying a car, picking out the model, the colour, organising payment and then remembering you don't know how to drive! Running, especially running fast, is a skill and just like any other skill it can be taught and it can be developed to a high level. Through using some basic techniques you and your kids can learn to run faster, safer, and get more enjoyment from your training.



Brain-Body Training

Remember, children are not mini-adults and you can't expect them to copy what you do in your training programme. When we learn a new way of moving (like the first time we run) our brain and muscles develop a movement pattern, which is like a map, so it can remember the movement the next time we repeat it.

The problem is you can't simply perform the movement once and save it. You have to repeat the sequence over and over until that particular movement pattern is permanently ingrained in your muscle memory. That is why youngsters, when they are learning a new skill, are initially erratic, jumpy and unsteady, but then begin to smooth out their movements. They become more efficient in the process until eventually it happens automatically.

Children learn very quickly compared to adults. At the Running School we can change the running technique of an eight or nine year old in 60 minutes and have them comfortable with their new technique, but it can take two to three sessions to change the inefficient running technique of an adult.

Start Young

Parents ask me when is the best time to get their children started in running. I tell them that, although movement training should begin as soon as possible after the 7th or 8th birthday depending on the growth rate, the optimal time for training movement and running is between the ages of nine and 12. Without getting too deeply into human biology and sports science, this is because there is still the possibility of developing and steering the central nervous system at this age and youngsters have the potential to acquire high levels of coordination and agility.

We are not talking about sending children out on long distance runs here. That would be counter-productive to what we trying to achieve, which is to teach the technique of running. Kids learn better when they are fresh and having fun. The exercises should be enjoyable and, yes, intense, but of short duration – about eight to twelve seconds.

Training in more basic, functional, movement can and should begin between the ages of three and six years old. With the correct teaching methodologies toddlers can develop balance,

coordination, awareness, agility and sport skills from a very early stage, which gives them a tremendous advantage if they decide to take up a sport or be active later.

The Keys to Good Technique

So, how can you help your child to learn to run? The most efficient running motion is when the body has very little up and down movement (bouncing). The arms are relaxed, but moving like mini pistons backwards and forwards, and the legs are cycling with the heel coming up above the back of the knee when it is off the ground. This is what you're aiming to teach them to do by concentrating on the following:

Feet: The feet should be landing under the body (centre of gravity) not ahead of it. Overstriding causes a braking action and slows runners down.

Landing: They need to learn to land lightly on their feet. The best and most efficient way to run is to land on the balls of the feet, not on the heel. When we teach children this is what we advise as the ideal. But if someone's been a heel-toe runner for a while it can be difficult to adjust. We advise starting by practising landing lighter on the ground and trying to minimise the time the foot spends on the ground. At first it's a good idea to practice for 10 minutes at a time to get used to it.

Lower Leg Cycling motion: Teach them to move their legs in a cycling motion, like riding a bike. They should pull their heels up towards their backside as well as lifting the knees.

Arms: Good coordination of the arms with the legs eliminates bounce and gets runners moving forward rather than upwards. The arms should be bent at the elbow at about 90 degrees and the movement should be back and forward. The fingers should be closed but relaxed (as if holding an egg) and the hand should be moving to the chin and the hip.

Don't try and get your child to take everything on at once, it can take several sessions to learn each technique. Work on each one until it becomes fluid and then move onto the next.

Mike Antoniadis is the founder and Performance Director of The Running School which has franchises across the UK and Europe. www.runningschool.co.uk

The Running School

- The Running School is a unique centre dedicated to teaching people of all ages 'How to Run'. A detailed biomechanical assessment is carried out and then the next five sessions are devoted to teaching and coaching running technique, based on fitness levels and what you want to achieve.
- Courses start weekly from 8 years old to 80.
- "We teach you how to run and then... we teach you how to run FAST!"
- For more information on improving your running and on franchise Information log on to: www.runningschool.co.uk. Tel: 020 8563 0007

