



THE JOURNAL OF YOUTH RUNNING

WHAT COACHES TOLD US

REVIEW

In 2018, the Journal of Youth Running reported on research conducted by Nova Southeastern University¹. The study identified how selected high school coaches perceive elementary school-aged children training for and competing in races at various distances, and the likelihood of their continued participation in the sport.

Researchers Jeff Fountain, Ph.D. and Peter Finley, Ph.D., Associate Professors of Sport Management, invited five hundred top-tier² high school cross-country coaches to participate in the study. The coaches represented all 50 states; all classifications (schools with small and large enrollments); and coaches of both boys' and girls' teams.

In summary, the study showed that participating coaches believe, and by significant margins, that children who train for, and compete at distances the coaches believe inappropriate for their age, increase the prospect they will experience burnout before high school.

Tangential to the findings is the reporting that race organizers have expanded the opportunities for children to race frequently and at distances reserved for adults just a generation ago. The promise of awards, published results, and for the host -- the income generated by offering competitive-age categories for children -- have contributed to the opportunity for children to do too much, too soon.

¹. <http://thesportjournal.org/article/road-racing-and-youth-running-cross-country-coaches-perspectives/>

². Measured by four, top-ten finishes as a team in state cross country finals over a five-year period, 2011-2015

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

- ☑ Twenty-three percent of the coaches report the longest distance of an organized Fun Run for children 3rd grade or younger should be shorter than ½ mile. 77% support distances from ½ mile to one mile.
- ☑ Coaches, by a wide margin, identify age 9 (4th and 5th grade) as the earliest age for children to enter a 5K, but with the caveat that the purpose is to have fun, to walk if necessary, to earn a finisher's medal or T-shirt. When the purpose changes to setting a personal best, seeing their name in published race results, or winning awards, the age is 11.
- ☑ Coaches without fail favor ages 12, 13 or 14, (middle school) as the earliest age to enter a 5K race for competitive purposes, i.e., with formal coaching, scheduled workouts and setting performance goals.
- ☑ Eighty-five percent of the coaches responding to the survey either believe, or strongly believe, that elementary and middle school-aged children that routinely enter races at distances longer than 5K are at high risk of burnout before reaching high school. 71.9% used words like *risky*, *dangerous* and *harmful* with reference to elementary school-aged children entering events 10K or longer.

THE RESPONSE

Following publication of the Nova survey results, the Journal of Youth Running received emails from readers, many in support, but some not. None contested the results, but more than one objected to the Journal "focusing on the negative and not the positive" of youth running. "Burnout" being the negative. From an editorial perspective, pointing out risks to future participation in running is a positive. If we identify and address the risks, we keep youth running moving in a positive direction.

Here, without crediting the authors, many who were part of the survey and thus anonymous, are responses the Journal of Youth Running received acknowledging the downside of young children competing, and at longer and longer distances. It is our hope you will find these both interesting and reassuring.

"Be smart about it. Don't risk the physical development of the child because of a parents' dream. Let them be a kid and be involved in many sports/activities. They can be more focused later in life."

"Do not push the competitive part of the races. Let the child run for the fun of it. Start small and resist the urge to expect faster and faster times."

"Associate running with fun. Jog to a park or the local ice cream shop, anything to keep it light. Emphasize running as enjoyable and a lifestyle, not as a means to a fast race."

"School athletic associations allow children to progress from one distance to another as they mature. It is parents and race organizers who permit, even encourage, kids running distances and to race before they have built a foundation. 5Ks and 10Ks are kind of a 'bucket list', with kids having checked them off before even middle school."

"We are setting up our young athletes to encounter injuries or just grow bored with the sport when they move into a psychological 'racing' mindset too soon."

"Parents respond to the running culture that we, the adults, provide (Fun Runs that become races, racing clubs, coaches for kids running, etc). We need to tone it down, especially the pressure we put on kids to perform."

"Let the child develop an appreciation of the sport without pushing them physically and mentally at too young of an age."

"Keep it fun, don't focus on miles. If you want them to run, then have destination runs to a friend's house, to the library, to the store. Each run should be an adventure or a mode of transportation, not a timed or recorded event."

"In our community a popular athletic shoe store sponsors a coaching program for kids, some as young as 4 years old, all building up to entering 5K races. What are they thinking?"



"For elementary-school aged kids, running must be fun. Racing on the playground, running relays, a mile Fun Run are all great, but racing at distances like a 5K should be discouraged."

"They will have plenty of opportunities when they get older to get serious. Let kids be kids and not grow up too fast. All that does is result in burnout and quitting or not enjoying the sport when they get older."

"Any activity that a child participates in must be by his or her choice. Encouraging a child to participate is great. Be supportive and provide a variety of opportunities. Make it fun, and don't worry about competition. There's enough time in life to have that."

"Running should be child driven. Most kids aren't ready to begin training until middle school. Even then, their miles should be regulated. Children would much rather play kickball, capture the flag, or ride bikes than log miles all week. Let them be a kid, and they will develop a love for running as they get older."

"The most successful runners begin their career in high school. We would prefer that they have not been formally trained at all until 9th grade. If they have done it at an earlier age, they tend to burn out."

"Expose your kids to any and all athletic pursuits. It is more important to develop basic athletic potential as opposed to specialized training."

"The big concern is overuse syndrome. It is wise to allow young children to participate in a variety of physical activities and sports and avoid the pitfall of one sport at this young age."

"Make running fun and just one form of physical activity that kids can do to be well-rounded. Sole participation in any one sport is a recipe for injury and burnout."

"Don't let your kids participate in road races at those (early elementary-school) ages. Have them play soccer, swim, ride bikes, etc., let them be kids."

"Keep expectations in perspective and run as a family simply for fun. Never stress performance or preparation with serious formalized workouts."

"I've seen 14-year-olds run a lot of races. Rarely are they doing much competitively by high school. It is such a shame."

"Let them have fun. Make them take days off to rest. Too many super-fast kids never turn out fast later. They burn out or get injured."



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