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MORE ON FUN, LESS ON AWARDS

Douglas Finley, Editor, at www.childrensrunning.org

When children run for the satisfaction, the simple enjoyment they get out of running, they are intrinsically motivated. Bravo! The feeling of having accomplished something; the joy derived from the activity itself; from having completed the distance. These are what running is all about.

When children run to receive some tangible benefit or reward, i.e., the T-shirt, trophy, water bottle or some fancy finisher's medal, they are extrinsically motivated.

To some, those closest to children's running, there is fear that running is going down the same path as other youth sports where extrinsic awards have become more important than the intrinsic experiences. They see race officials reinforcing this by handing out awards in the belief awards are central to the running experience. Most troubling, they see parents and kids who make the pursuit of hardware a reason to run.

☑ An Unsettled Issue

Herb Lindsay, a past world record holder in the half marathon and today an outstanding elementary school teacher in Fremont, Michigan, firmly believes that children's running should be built solely on intrinsic values, free of any expectation of extrinsic motivators. Lindsay inspires his young runners to be fit, to be strong, to be confident, to own their running but never to expect to be rewarded for it.

Lindsay's position supports the view that children's running would be better off without all the awards; the perks that kids get, most often for just finishing a run. Tom Rothenberger, coach at Jesuit High School in Portland, Oregon, also supports this view, saying that adults frequently put "...too much of the carrot in kids' running and not enough of the culture." Rothenberger says that adults need to put their energy into creating opportunities for kids to discover on their own the enjoyment they get from running and focus less on the carrot.

Others will argue the finisher's medal and water bottles have played a huge part in getting something close to five million children running annually in school programs alone. And they are right. They also might say awards are part of today's youth sports culture, something kids and their parents expect. And again, they would be right.

Today, kids come away from running too often loaded down with a race number, T-shirt, and a finisher's medal and maybe even a water bottle. And yes, kids love this stuff, but many high school coaches see awards as being used to entice children to run. These same coaches believe it is the intrinsic experience – the joy, the success and being part of something special that will ultimately cause children to run and continue running, not the awards.

For many children, whose dream of winning a medal or trophy in high school athletics will never be realized, a finisher's medal may be the only testament of having crossed the finish line on race day with proud parents cheering from the curb. Their medal validates that on that day and at that distance, they finished, they were athletic.

☑ **Where, When and Why**

To Mike Woolsey, coach at Michigan's Jackson Lumen Christi High School, it is not whether extrinsic motivators are good for running, but what extrinsic motivators are appropriate for young children and what role do such rewards play in motivating them?

Woolsey says all kids' sports use incentives and the sport of children's running probably needs to as well. But, he adds, "We need to carefully guard against the incentive becoming more important than the accomplishment." When that happens, when the award becomes more important than the accomplishment, children will stay motivated only as long as they continue to enjoy the awards.

Coaches like Mike Woolsey agree that when awards become the norm, they no longer inspire children to do their best, to test themselves, to succeed. When children get an award for just showing up, why should they try hard? Where is the motivation to push through discomfort if they are going to be rewarded for just completing the distance?

☑ **For Race/Fun Run Organizers**

There are three simple rules here. First, concentrate on what motivates children intrinsically. This starts with offering Fun Runs that are actually fun; something new, something different from every other Fun Run.

Consider hosting a flashlight run, an obstacle course or a mud run, a superhero's costume run (see photo), a relay carnival or maybe a five event Kids' Pentathlon. Or work with your high school AD or coach on hosting a Fun Run on the track at night under the field lights with music like that from *Chariots of Fire* blasting out over the PA system. The kids and parents will love it. Best yet, the award will be of the most important kind: the experience gained, where having fun becomes the award, the reason to enter.

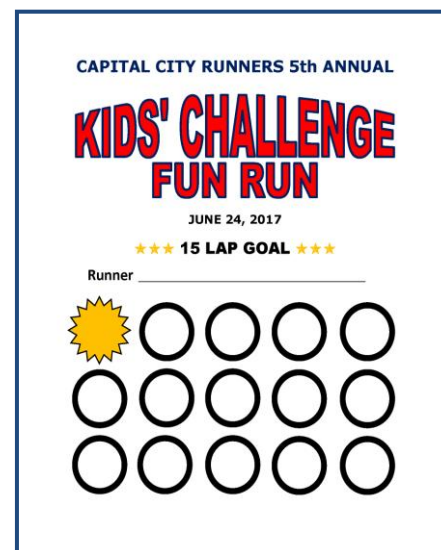
Second, anything and everything tangible should be earned. There is no intrinsic value created by giving awards just for showing up or for completing a run where the award is greater than the accomplishment.

Third, if absolutely committed to offering some award, get creative. Instead of the overvalued finisher's medal, consider a colorful certificate, or a "score sheet" with bright stickers attached by the parent, one sticker for each lap completed on a "Kids' Challenge" course, or maybe have some local sports star or popular local TV personality autographing bib numbers. All are fairly simple, at the very low end of what is a tangible award, yet each is something that will have earned its rightful place on the family refrigerator.

Or work with other Fun Run organizers to create a series of runs, where the finisher's medal goes to runners who complete all the Fun Runs in the series, not just one.



Photo: Timothy Nettleton



☑ Final Thoughts for Parents

Parents wanting their children to discover the intrinsic values of running can start by looking for events their child can run in where the reward is a great experience, not the promise of a T-shirt, a medal or fancy water bottle just for showing up.

Second, if awards are given, don't you, as the parent, make the award more important than the child's effort. Focus on acknowledging the child running a steady pace or a strong finish or how fast they recovered. If you make the award most important, so will the child.

Third, if your child has classmates who run, work with their parents to create your own running team, one that enters Fun Runs together, all wearing their own team T-shirt. Or pick one of the big *award-free* charity runs where they can run as a team, enjoying the festive nature of the run, crossing the finish line together, oblivious of time or place or awards.

And finally, if the child comes home with a fancy medal, good for them! Let the child take it to their room and even help them hang it on the wall if that is what they want. But think carefully before making a shrine of the medals, trophies or ribbons your child earns. The message it sends can be unhealthy, both for the child and any siblings.

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



Douglas Finley, partnering with Charles Kuntzleman, EdD, authored *Fun and Fitness – the Mileage Club Way*, published in 2015 by Fitness Finders Inc. Fitness Finders is the supplier of materials used in schools and youth programs across the country to promote healthy and fit children.

Finley, editor of the *Journal of Children's Running*, brought more than 40 years experience as a coach of young runners to the project. Dr. Kuntzleman, founder of the Mileage Club®, is an esteemed author and educator on subjects relating to health and fitness.

Fun and Fitness offers coaches of youth programs, parents and teachers more than 50 running activities, each designed to help make running and fitness exciting, with opportunities for children to realize success, enjoy ownership, and to discover running is much more than just going in circles.

Check it out at...

<http://www.fitnessfinders.net/Fun-and-Fitness-Booklet-p/126-funandfitness.htm>



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