

Ten Ways to Get Kids Excited About Running

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The importance of regular exercise in maintaining personal wellness has been well documented. Specifically, participation in fitness activities has been strongly linked to improved physiological functioning and increased cognitive and emotional well being (Brown & Brown, 1996; Turley, 1997). Consequently, strategies to enhance the fitness levels of the nation's youths have proliferated, with the creation of programs such as "Super Kids, Superfit," "Jump Rope for Heart," and "Hoops for Heart." In addition, physical education curricula have also addressed the issue of personal fitness through the inclusion of units such as circuit weight-training, fitness-testing, fitness concept instruction, aerobic dance, and modified "aerobic" sports.

Among all of the various fitness activities, though, running has been identified as perhaps the most impor-

tant and frequently used (Hill, Randle, & Mullen, 1992). Not only is running an inexpensive and convenient means of exercise, it also has positive transfer to most field, court, and racquet sports. In addition, running is a lifelong activity that has gained popularity with adults. Consequently, it is important that physical educators give children basic instruction on how to run properly as well as sufficient opportunities and incentives to run.

Unfortunately, many children do not enjoy running. This may be due to a number of factors, such as a perception of being an inadequate runner in comparison with peers or siblings, the physical discomfort associated with running, or a feeling that proficiency in running offers few potential benefits. The unfortunate result of early withdrawal from running, however, is usually lower fitness and less opportunity to develop many in-

dividual and team-related sport skills.

In order to motivate children of all abilities and ages to run, physical educators need to use innovative approaches that will help their students enjoy themselves and avoid embarrassment. This article describes ten such strategies, along with examples of specific activities.

Imagery

Imagery can be a powerful motivator if students are allowed to identify running with other activities that they consider prestigious or desirable (Balf, 1998). Teachers may find that imagery related to machines, animals, or elite performers is quite effective in motivating students to run. For example, primary students may find it fun to pretend that they are airplanes taxiing out to the runway for take-off and flying through the air. Students may also adjust running speeds by

pretending that they are either tortoises or hares. Some students may be motivated to imitate the form of an elite runner whom they have viewed on videotape.

Social Interaction

A primary drive among human beings is the desire to socialize through play (Solomon, 1997). Consequently, teachers may find it best to select running activities in which students have an opportunity to interact with one another. For example, students can run throughout the gym and give each classmate a "high five." Another socializing activity is "File-Running," in which the last person in line runs to the front to become the new leader until the next person from the end of the line arrives. Students may also run relays in which the emphasis is on beating a time that they have set rather than on trying to finish ahead of opponents.

Avoidance

It is human nature to want to avoid undesirable consequences. Teachers may tap into this motivation in a positive way by using running tag activities (i.e., students try to avoid being touched by other students). For example, in the game "Pac-Man," students must stay on gym lines to avoid being tagged by "Pac People." In the game "Jack Frost, Jane Thaw," students run as quickly as possible to avoid being tagged (and "frozen") by "Jack"; frozen students are free to run again once tagged by "Jane." For all tag games, teachers and coaches should devise ways for those students who are tagged to reenter the game quickly in order to remain active.

Subject Integration

In the spirit of a holistic approach to education, physical educators might integrate running with other academic subjects (Banister & Harlow, 1997; Markos, Walker, & Colvin, 1998; McBride & Cleland, 1998). For example, students may be required to solve a problem and run to a location associated with a solution (e.g., give

students a simple math problem, and place the numbers one through ten on gym walls or on signs attached to cones).

Another subject integration activity is to designate an area as a map (e.g., of the United States). Students can then be challenged to run to points that represent specific states, cities, lakes, rivers, and so forth. Clues may be given, including state nicknames, areas with a particular natural resource (e.g., potatoes), or historically significant locations (e.g., Gettysburg).

Self-Pacing

Since negative self-comparisons with other students can reduce motivation, it is important to give all students some control over their own running speed, as opposed to having them try to outrun other students (Chase, 1998; Mandigo & Thompson, 1998). One activity that accomplishes this is "Random Running," where students run for a set period of time anywhere they want, as opposed to around a track. Random Running rewards students for running even at very slow speeds, and may have positive transfer to their adult lives. Students may also find it more motivating to run as far as they can in a specific amount of time (e.g., a 12-minute run), rather than being timed over a specific distance (e.g., a one-mile run).

Music

Music can be a very strong motivator for running, particularly if it has a fast tempo (Bean, 1998; Greci, 1997). For warm-up activities such as walking, jogging, or sprinting, music with various tempos may be played to correspond with movement intensity. Physical education teachers may also use contemporary popular music to heighten student interest.

Partner Cooperatives

Students may be more motivated to run if they perceive that they are working either in a contest or in conjunction with a partner. For example, partners may take turns following each other at various paces, or one student may attempt to "lose" his or her partner within a set period of time. In "Run and Gun," one partner runs around the gym a predetermined number of times while the other partner shoots baskets. Later, the roles are reversed, with the runner trying to finish as quickly as possible so that the shooter has as little time as possible to exceed the previous basket total.

Goal-Setting and Feedback

Goal-setting has been proven to enhance motivation in a variety of settings (Sherman, 1999). Teachers may ask students to establish running goals and then monitor their performances in relation to those goals. Feedback



may include tangible rewards, praise, or even graphic feedback regarding their performances over time. For example, if a student sets a goal of eight minutes for a mile, gradual graphic feedback would give the student a visual representation of how quickly he or she is proceeding toward that goal. Graphic feedback may also help students run "across" a state or the entire country by keeping track of the miles they run and representing them on a map. Students may also keep track of mileage in a home fitness log, with parents verifying distances run.

Fitness-Testing

Students may be motivated to run in preparation for a fitness test, either to achieve a passing score (on a criterion-referenced test) or to score at a certain percentile (on a norm-referenced test). Teachers may reinforce this motivation by testing several times a year, thus keeping students accountable for improvements in cardiovascular fitness. The most recent version of the Fitnessgram (Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research, 1992) uses an

activity called "The Pacer" to test cardiovascular fitness. The Pacer requires students to run back and forth between lines that are 20 meters apart at a pace that quickens each minute of the test. Once the student can no longer run quickly enough, his or her test is over.

Competition

Many students will run for longer periods of time and at faster speeds if they are in competition with other students. For slower-moving students, however, competition may actually reduce motivation because of the sense of failure associated with doing poorly in comparison with peers. Yet if an instructor conducts two or more activities concurrently and allows students to select their own ability-level groups, competition can be an effective method of motivating all students to run. Additionally, schools may find that cross-country and track teams motivate students to run by giving them an opportunity to wear a school uniform and to compete against runners from other schools.

Final Thoughts

A summary of these strategies, including suggested age levels for their application, appears in figure 1. Teachers should try a variety of strategies when attempting to motivate students to run, since not all students will respond to the same approach. Teachers should also select age-appropriate activities and strive to make all running experiences both sufficiently challenging and enjoyable. Furthermore, the practice of using running as a punishment should be avoided. Instead, rewards and honors should be a regular part of any running program, with participation and meeting personal goals as the primary criteria for receiving such praise. Correct running form and safe stretching procedures should be taught, and teachers should closely monitor performance; they should try to help students reach a state of balance or "flow" in their running (Mandigo & Thompson, 1998). Finally, instructors should strive to be positive running role models, so that students will see consistency between teachers' expectations and lifestyles.

Figure 1. Summary of Ten Strategies

Concept	Activities	Equipment	Grade Levels
1. Imagery	Tortoise and Hare, Airplanes	none	K-3
2. Social Interaction	High Fives	none	K-4
3. Avoidance	Pac-Man walk/run	jerseys	3-6
4. Subject Integration	Running to solutions of simple math problems	tape and numbers	1-6
	Map of United States	none	1-6
5. Self-Pacing	Random Running	music	3-6
6. Music	Running to various tempos	tape with three music tempos needed to correspond with walk, jog, sprint signs	4-12
7. Partner Cooperatives	Partner Exchange Run and Gun	cones and basketballs	6-12
8. Goal-Setting	Running relays vs. time	large timer	4-12
9. Fitness Testing	Fitnessgram Pacer	cones, tape measure, masking tape, fitnessgram tape	1-12
10. Competition	Various games and relays	varies	K-12

If teachers successfully motivate students to make running a regular part of their lifestyles, there will likely be significant improvements in overall fitness levels. In addition, as students gain more confidence in their running abilities, positive transfer into all activities that require running will probably occur. Finally, teachers who motivate students to run will have given them a tool that has the potential of positively affecting their life-long health and wellness.

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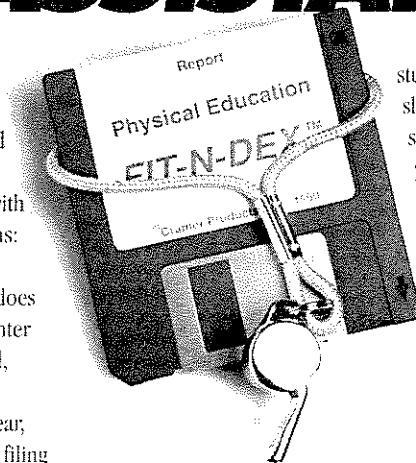
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