

April, 2017



## JOURNAL OF CHILDREN'S RUNNING

[www.childrensrunning.org](http://www.childrensrunning.org)

# SUCCESS = MOTIVATION

Douglas Finley, Editor, Center for Children's Running

Olympic Track and Field icon Peter Snell once described his early successes as a runner as motivating. Patricia Cunningham and Richard Allington, authors of books on how children learn, would agree, especially as it pertains to children. They understand that success precedes motivation. Once children see they can be successful, they will become engaged, ready to take on new challenges, motivated.

Cunningham and Allington believe that to motivate children, adults need to create the opportunity for children to succeed. That does not mean hand them success, but simply to offer experiences that allow children to realize they accomplished something in the end; they succeeded. Cunningham and Allington call this *Engineering for Success*.

David Gallahue, Ed.D., and Phillip Hanson, Ph.D., at Indiana University, in an article titled "*Why Kid's Ditch Youth Sports*," report that to make youth sports fun, children need to realize success. Most coaches working with young runners would agree. Fun and motivation are synonymous: if we are having fun we are motivated to continue.

### What Constitutes Success?

Coaches, by a wide margin of those surveyed by the Center for Children's Running, agree that fast times and high finishes by young runners are poor values for measuring success.

Stan Lambros, Cross Country and Track Coach at Cheyenne Mountain High School in Colorado, subscribes to the theory that if you want kids to enjoy the running experience, place the focus on what they run each day; not on their times or how they placed or expect to place in some kids' race. Lambros believes kids who are nurtured on top finishes and how fast they are in elementary school may not be prepared for the stiff competition they will experience as teens. Many stop running.

### A Sense of Accomplishment Every Day

Greg Meyer, a sub-four-minute miler who went on to win the Detroit, Boston and Chicago Marathons in the 1980s, sides with those who believe success is a powerful motivator in children. Meyer says, "Success does not have to be some big success that takes weeks to accomplish, but little successes every day; those that will give children a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction and confidence."



### ☑ Success Is Individual

Success will be different for each child. For some, it will be simply finishing a run. For others it may be running farther or faster than last time or mastering some new skill like passing off a relay baton. For yet others, it is as simple as being recognized for their effort, for showing great determination, for just doing their best. If the child sets too lofty a goal, it is the responsibility of the parent/coach to suggest taking little steps to reach that goal, each step offering the child an opportunity to experience a level of personal accomplishment.

Children running with a friend or a parent, the kind of run where the distance passes easily, where conversation trumps speed, can be counted as a great success. But so can taking on new challenges, finishing exhausted, with arms raised high in the air. Both are integral to success, each with equal weight.

### ☑ Every Child a Winner

Bill Sumner, coach at Corona del Mar High School in Newport Beach, California, agrees on the importance of success, but often uses the word *winning* when talking about children and running. To Sumner, when a child succeeds by running just one second faster than a week before, the child wins, just as a child improving their grade in the classroom is a winner. In this context, winning and success are one in the same. For example: "Kendra, I know you can do this obstacle course three times today." As simple as that is, it gives Kendra a goal, one you know she can achieve. When she does it, and she will, congratulate her. She experienced success. She is a winner.

### ☑ Keeping Focus

Coach Lambros tells us to keep our focus on what the child is doing that day and that time. Along with this, keep the focus on their effort; their determination. Why? Because for many young runners, where they finish in terms of time or place may not reflect their effort. They ran smart, paced themselves well, had a strong finish, but their time and place may distort their feeling of success. By placing the focus on their effort, on what went well, they can come away from the run feeling they succeeded regardless of their time or place.

### ☑ The Parent/Coach Challenge

It is incumbent on the adults who give structure to children's running to recognize the importance of children experiencing success so each child can go away from each run feeling they accomplished something. Forget about the drills, the warm-up routines and the distances to be run. Just concentrate on creating, i.e., engineering, opportunities for children to accomplish something each day.

Engineering for success starts with identifying simple goals; ones that young runners -- those who are just getting started -- can achieve. Like how to finish together as a team, or how to run a short distance at the same pace every time. These present an opportunity for all young runners, those in an after-school or summer program or those running with mom or dad, to experience immediate success, all in one afternoon.



## SUCCESS FOR STARTERS

### #1 - TEAM RUNNING

Set up some kind of marker or identify a tree 25 or 30 yards from the starting line. Put the kids into teams of two or three and simply have the team run around the marker or tree and back to the start, all finishing together, side by side, as a team.

This sounds easy but for some kids it takes a while. Racing instincts tend to take over. If they don't get it right the first time, tell them again what you want – them to finish side-by-side. If that does not work, tell them (with a smile) you will make them hold hands next time. When they do it, they succeeded. After a few times, have them go a little farther before they come back.

## ☑ Success Is Not Found at the Back of the Pack

Engineering for success in every run takes a little thought, a little imagination. And occasionally, even when we try, the run doesn't turn out as planned. This is okay, providing we don't allow a run to result in a feeling of repeated frustration or failure by any child.

How does repeated frustration or failure happen? Well, just about every time kids run in a group, someone charges to the front and others follow. The field eventually stretches out and, inevitably, the slower runners -- mostly the same ones every time -- finish far behind the leaders. The consensus, at least as reported by runners who have been there, is that success and motivation are seldom found at the back of the pack.

Have a plan for children who are always bringing up the rear. One way is to create two or three loops of different lengths with the shortest one being for newer, younger, or slower runners. Let the kids run the same loop four or five times with a brief rest between runs. The kids who are running the short loop may do it in, say 1:24. The other runners, those on the longer loops, also may be hitting the 1:24 range. Although the kids aren't racing, they generally respond to the challenge of running fast like the others, even when recognizing that their loop is shorter.

## ☑ Real Success

When we talk about success, we need to be talking about real success, the kind kids actually earn. Coach Bill Sumner says we should praise children for every positive result and be sincere, but don't just make it up. When kids accomplish something they were working at, then it is time to give high-fives, fist-bumps or whatever fits the situation. The kids will walk away with a smile on their faces, knowing that they succeeded.

What not to do is tell them "you did great today." Tell them exactly what they did that was great, like running an even pace or running as a team or doing an obstacle course three times, one more than last week. This lets the child know that you, the parent or coach, recognize their effort, their accomplishment, and their success. Be specific and again, make it sincere.

## ☑ Relevant and Timely

Big goals, like telling kids the first day they are going to walk/run in some big charity 5K three months from now, even before they can run a half-mile, isn't relevant for most kids. It is too hard to visualize and too far in the future to have any meaning. This does not mean cancel the charity 5K, but just don't make that the target. Let each day, each run, offer an opportunity for kids to gain, as Greg Meyer says, a "...sense of accomplishment, satisfaction and confidence" on their way to the 5K. Later, when they can run two miles, start mentioning what comes next, but save it until they are ready.

## SUCCESS FOR STARTERS

### #2 - PACE RUNNING

For the second run you will need a wristwatch, preferably one that is digital. If you have more than one or two children, you may also need a paper and pencil.

Using the same simple out-and-back course, have the children one at a time run around the marker and back at an easy pace. Record their time. Now, challenge them to do it again in the same time. Not faster, but the same time. Like down to within a second.

Yes, it will take a few attempts, but when they record the same time two or three times they have accomplished something measurable, they succeeded! Next week you can start increasing the distance, but only gradually. Later, tell them to run just a little faster on the first run. Their time becomes the new time to match.

As posted on...



To subscribe, email  
editor@childrensrunning.org.

Copyright reserved by the author and the  
Center for Children's Running, 2017