

Girls on the Run

Educating and preparing girls for a lifetime of self-respect and healthy living

by Mark Katz, PhD



GIRLS ON THE RUN combines uplifting running workouts with curriculum-based experiential activities. The program is proving to be a fun way for girls aged eight to thirteen to learn how to celebrate their strengths, create positive connections, and successfully handle life's challenges both currently and in the years to come. Under the supervision of a trained coach, girls meet in groups twice weekly for twelve weeks. The groups engage in experiential activities drawn from the program's curriculum. At the end of each session, the girls participate in a running workout. The running workouts serve to prepare them for the program's culminating event—a 5K run/walk.


The curriculum is divided into three parts, each eight lessons in length. Part one provides girls an opportunity to examine their values, express their likes and dislikes, and envision their future lives. Among the topics are “Fueling our healthy pace,” “Centering: the importance of slowing down,” and “Celebrating gratitude.” Part two provides practice in teambuilding and in skills like listening and cooperating. Lesson topics include “Gossiping hurts every-

one” and “It’s okay to choose my friends.” The final eight lessons focus on the community and how girls can contribute significantly to helping others. Lessons also cover potentially negative community effects—media messages and peer pressure, for example—as well as lessons on what girls can do to offset these effects.

Kathryn Reid, a trained Girls on the Run coach in Southern California, finds that girls really enjoy the program. They especially benefit from the experience of training for a 5K event and then completing it successfully with other girls. “It’s empowering,” says Reid. Beyond this, the lessons learned can serve participants long after the program ends. Among the valuable life lessons are how to strengthen personal identity, how to stand up for yourself in a healthy manner, how to develop a positive body image, how to understand your importance to your community, and how to better prepare yourself for challenges you’ll be facing in the coming years.

The program is the brainchild of Molly Barker, MSW, from Charlotte, North Carolina. Barker began running as a teenager and remembers the accom-

panying emotional benefits. A four-time Hawaii Ironman triathlete, she drew upon those early experiences, as well as her counseling and teaching experience and knowledge of adolescent research, to develop the original model, which began in 1996 with one group of thirteen girls. Today, Girls on the Run has over 3,600 locations in 162 communities and has served over a quarter of a million girls. Some locations also offer an extension of the model, Girls on Track, which is appropriate for girls in grades six through eight.

Readers interested in learning more about this innovative nonprofit prevention model—including program locations, program costs, and ways to get involved—may visit girlsontherun.org. In 2009, one of the program’s national sponsors challenged girls to write an essay of 300 words or less titled, “How Girls on the Run Helped You to Be More Fearless.” Visitors to the website can also read the winning essays. Readers who wish to speak to a program representative directly by phone can do so by calling 1-800-901-9965. Staff can also be reached via e-mail at info@girlsontherun.org. 

Mark Katz, PhD, is a clinical and consulting psychologist and the director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological and neuropsychological center located in San Diego, California. He is a contributing editor to Attention magazine and a member of its editorial advisory board, a former member of CHADD’s professional advisory board, and a recipient of the CHADD Hall of Fame Award.