

Running USA White Paper: Tips for a Successful Kids Run



By Lucie Murray

As running programs across the country look towards the future, many have recognized that one of the best ways to ensure a future generation of committed runners is to nurture them as kids. As a result, most large races have incorporated some type of youth running program into their organizational mission statements and priorities.

These youth running programs take on many forms. Some are single day events that just entail young runners showing up for a fun short race, while others are year-round school based programs requiring the support of volunteers, teachers, parents and paid staff.

In this white paper, we focus specifically on tips for hosting a successful kids run during your live event. These are short, non-competitive, non-timed running or walking events for pre-teen participants. They may seem simple, but there are many advantages to be gained from prioritizing the kids run just as you would your adult races.

"When race directors inspire youth by offering kids runs, school-based partnerships, or training programs for longer distance events, they are welcoming the next generation into our athletic communities and inspiring lifelong health!"

-Lucie Murray, Founder of Run Kids Run

About the author

Lucie Murray is the founder of Run Kids Run (www.runkidsrun.com), an event services company committed to engaging youth and families in endurance sports. Since 2009, Lucie and her team have worked with hundreds of events across Southern California, including the LA Big 5K, Santa Monica Classic, Malibu Triathlon, Hollywood Half Marathon, and the Pier 360 Beach Festival to produce their kids events. She currently works with The McCourt Foundation, a Running USA foundation member, as the Youth Program Administrator and has been a contributor to Race Director HQ and Gopher Sports PE Blog. Lucie is an endurance runner who founded and coaches We Fit Moms, a fitness group for women.

What is a kids run?

A Kids Run is typically a short, non-competitive, non-timed running or walking event for young children (usually pre-teen) that is part of a 5K, 10K, half marathon or other amateur athletic event. The most common distance is the 1K but because it is just for fun, it can take on any form and is easily customized to meet the needs of your event's space, demographic, and schedule.

The Kids Run shares many qualities with the main event and is easily integrated into the day's schedule, but there are some unique considerations based on the development levels of children, special attention to safety, and how parents interact with the event that will affect how this type of event is managed.



Why host a kids run?

When asking Race Directors why they want to add a Kids Run to their existing or new running event, answers usually reference childhood obesity and revenue. Great answers, but the benefits of adding a Kids Run – such as reaching new audiences, attracting new sponsors and vendors, and taking advantage of new marketing outlets - go well beyond that and understanding these advantages can help you lean into them with your marketing and outreach efforts.



Adding family activities to your event can engage new sponsors who might not otherwise feel connected to a running event

Expand your audience and reach new prospects

Beyond your typical runner scanning the race calendar for a goal race, fast 5K or, BQ, there are lots of families who are looking for something fun and active to do on the weekend with the kids. They may first come across your event through their relationship with another organization and the family activity may be what convinces them to sign up. Organizations where families connect include:

- Parent/mom-focused fitness or social groups
- Schools or PTAs
- Charities
- Corporate/workplace teams

Explore and actualize new sponsor and partner opportunities

Adding family activities to your event can engage new sponsors who might not otherwise feel connected to a running event, including:

- Family brands
- Local retailers, kids' activities, performers
- Coaches, fitness studios, and camps
- Pediatric medical providers like dentists, orthodontists, podiatrists
- Business services such as realtors, estate planners, and insurance providers
- Family-focused influencers who can bring their followers/customers to your event
- Educators such as private schools, tutors, and afterschool programs.

Take advantage of new marketing outlets

Hosting family activities can open up new marketing opportunities where the target audience is parents. Examples include:

- Free parent-focused print and online calendars
- Social media parent groups
- Community news
- Ads in family magazines
- Banners in a family-friendly venue



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Kids runs can provide residual event growth benefits

While more difficult to measure, family engagement activities can help your event grow and enhance the experience, making it more than a race.

- **A Kids Run or Kids Zone encourages people to stay at your expo longer to visit vendors, buy food, and make a day of your event.** While some runners just come for the finish line and medal, families with children seek out opportunities to hang out for a few hours in a fun festive environment.
- **Family activities attract and welcome multiple generations – including children and older generations like grandparents who want to support, cheer, or spend time with the kids.** A fun event can establish annual family traditions and feed the pipeline of running events. Remember that kids don't come alone to events - they come with adults, siblings, and friends who will register for the event, spectate, or volunteer!
- **Many children who learn to love running by finishing a 1K may age up to the 5K and maybe the marathon one day.** By offering Kids Runs we welcome young people into our sport and community and show them there is a place for them that encourages healthy competition, sportsmanship, physical activity, self-confidence, inclusion, and community.



Best practices for your best kids run yet

While many Race Directors understand the importance of adding a Kids Run, they often underestimate the nuances involved in planning a successful and safe event. There are some aspects that require special attention, mainly because children’s cognitive and physical development means they approach races differently from adults! While every Kids Run is unique – the number of participants, distance, terrain, and schedule will vary depending on your main event and location - there are some key planning elements that are important for all events to ensure a safe and fun event that families will love!

Dedicate a key staff person or experienced volunteer to oversee the kids run

This person manages everything Kids Run - from the planning to the implementation on race day. They are the primary manager of the youth activity. The Race Director will have multiple duties and “fires” to put out on race day so having someone specifically focused on the kids event is important for its success and for the safety of the participants.

When planning your course, remember that kids run differently from adults

If an adult goes off-course they’ll probably be upset but will usually find their way back to the finish line. If a child goes off-course it can be very scary. A simple course that is easy to manage with minimal turns, clear signage, strategic placement of cones and barricades, and lots of volunteers is a safe approach for young children.

Have enough dedicated volunteers on hand for effective management

The Kids Run typically starts later in the event when volunteers are ending a shift or starting to thin out. By the time the Kids Run comes around, there may not be enough general volunteers available and assuming that you'll just "grab some from registration" is not a solid plan. Ideally you should know ahead of time how many dedicated volunteers you'll need for the start/finish line, each course turn, and any sections where runners will be near traffic or hazards like curbs or potholes. A Kids Run without enough volunteers can be a mess and potentially dangerous.

Start the run with safety in mind

The start line is the area where most falls happen. Children start running too fast out of the gate. The littlest kids like to be in front with the bigger, faster kids. Some children get into a "crouch start" position because they think it'll make them go faster. Parents running with their children can easily double the size of the crowd. All these factors can lead to a pile-up!

No matter the size of your Kids Run, plan for a safe start that minimizes risk of falling. Consider wave starts for larger groups with the oldest first. Ask parents with strollers to start in the back. Talk to children about starting to run from a standing position and checking that their shoes are tied. A well-prepared announcer can talk about all these issues as well as pacing and reuniting with parents at the finish.

Maintain a medical tent while the kids run takes place

It is important to have your main medical tent set up for the duration of your Kids Run. Sometimes children fall or get overwhelmed by the excitement. It's important to know there's a medical staff person available and for your key volunteers/staff to be aware of the location.

Have a protocol in place for lost children

When children get separated from their parents, it is frightening for all parties. It is important to create a lost child protocol well ahead of the event and communicate the policy with your staff and key volunteers. Delaying the reunification of parent and child because they are being taken to different locations is upsetting. As part of your start line announcements, remind parents to speak to their children about where they will reunite and what happens if they get separated.

Practice parent and spectator crowd control

Children who participate in Kids Runs usually have a small entourage of family-fans who are all excited to see their young athlete cross the finish line! It is WONDERFUL when parents want to encourage children to run. Unfortunately, some parents focus so much on their own children



that they forget about the other participants and can act in ways that put participants at risk. Stopping mid-course to take photos, crossing into the lanes of runners to reunite with a child, or moving barricades to have easier access to the course are all ways I've seen children get hurt because of the actions of overly-enthusiastic spectators. When planning your kids run, pay attention to how the spectator will interact with the course and have a clear reunion area. Consider how to use barricades to protect your participants while allowing spectators a way to celebrate and cheer from the sidelines.

Remember privacy is paramount

We live in a time of shared information, but we must

always consider the privacy of children when we post their photos, results (if applicable), and registration info. If adding photos to your website, avoid any that may link a specific child to a school, club, or neighborhood. If your event is timed, consider using first name and last initial and removing any reference to city of residence with those results.

Next steps

Race directors and school leadership who are interested in developing or growing a youth event can find resources and schedule a free 30 minute consultation by going to www.runkidsrun.com.

