



Girls on the Run in Chicago

By Christina Chapan

Children today are bombarded with more choices for recreation than ever before. The age of technology not only brings convenience but also an opportunity for a sedentary lifestyle. Parents often struggle to keep their children active and physically fit. It is difficult to find a way to motivate especially preteen girls to have a healthy lifestyle. This challenge increases as children grow up and enter their adolescent years.

But one program has successfully done this. The Girls on the Run program is an afterschool program that promotes healthy lifestyles for girls third through eighth grade with character education lessons, running and exercise. Girls as they mature are often told through false messages that playing sports is not cool and that being athletic is not feminine. The Girls on the Run program is a great way to encourage fitness in the classroom and community, and it extends to the home as well.

Girls on the Run targets inactive girls and girls with low self esteem and encourages girls to stay active. It also fosters those students who are already athletes to continue to enjoy exercise, try new forms of fitness activities, and reach out to the community with active volunteer programs as well.

The program aims to help girls make exercise a lifelong habit by introducing them to running and other forms of physical fitness. Girls meet twice a week for an hour before or after school, learn a life-changing lesson, play an active game, eat a healthy snack, and prepare for a 5K that is held bi-annually in the surrounding area. Teachers, principals, or local community members volunteer with the program as coaches.

Each child in the 5K race event is accompanied by a running buddy. This event is held on a Saturday or Sunday to encourage family participation. Parents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, other family members as well as coaching staff accompany these girls as they run. Buddies come in all shapes and sizes from the elite athlete to the recreational walker. All have one thing in common though: to motivate and positively encourage their girl to finish the race strong and feeling good. Buddies encourage runners to "run in such a way as to get the prize." Every finisher gets a medal to celebrate their accomplishment. All girls no matter their speed are told that they are winners and can do anything that they put their mind to.

The program's curriculum is based on building life-skill lessons and finding ways to build the girls' self-esteem through fitness. Lessons included in the curriculum include how to deal with bullies, combating unrealistic body images, making healthy choices, and helping others. The program ends with a party hosted by a local school after the 5K.

Girls on the Run Chicago started in Chicago in 1999 with only five coaches. Currently, it serves over 2,326 girls with diverse ethnic backgrounds, and it has trained over 300 volunteer coaches in the past year. The costs of the program are based on the average income of the surrounding community. Girls on the Run Chicago serves the Cook, Lake, DuPage, Kane, and Will counties. Parents and volunteer coaches have commented that there have been many positive changes in their girls' lives. Some of the comments included: she has higher self-esteem, improved eating attitude, an improved body image, has a positive peer group and positive role models for her future.

Girls on the Run Chicago gives young girls the tools and life lessons that they need to transform their lives and the lives of others. Nichhya Byrd, the 2008 Chicago nominee for the ESPY award, says that "Running has taught me to do my best, on and off the track, and that I can do whatever I dream, if I put my mind to it. But most of all I just love to run with my friends. It's fun." And everyone agrees that fitness has to be fun to be a lifelong habit! Girls learn through Girls on the Run that they can do anything they put their mind to, even finishing a 5K.

There are many ways to be involved with Girls on the Run in your community. This program is not only in Chicago but is also across the country. To find out if there is an existing program in your community go to:

<http://girlsontherun.org/locations.html>

Opportunities include volunteer coaching opportunities, helping or assisting at running events, or sponsoring the program with a financial contribution through fundraising for a running event or an individual contribution.

Please email info@gotrchicago.org for more information.



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