

# Fun & Fitness

A group of five children are running across a lush green grassy field. In the background, there is a colorful playground with blue and red equipment. The sky is bright blue with some light clouds. The overall scene is vibrant and energetic, representing a fun and active environment for children.

The Mileage Club<sup>®</sup> Way

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Fun & Fitness: The Mileage Club® Way  
(Published by Fitness Finders, Inc.,  
1007 Hurst Rd, Jackson, MI 49201)  
[www.fitnessfinders.net](http://www.fitnessfinders.net)

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Printed in the United States of America by Smartpress.com (18781  
Lake Dr E, Chanhassen, MN 55317) 952-227-1001

First Printing, August 2014

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# Foreword

*Mileage Club®*, the granddaddy of all youth running clubs, was begun by Fitness Finders in 1986 in a public school in Jackson County, Michigan. Since then, it has grown to include more than 20,000 schools and youth agencies. In a recent school year, millions of children logged more than 30 million miles—that’s 372 million minutes of exercise!

*Why this success? Because the Fitness Finders® philosophy is to develop educational and behavior-change strategies that are developmentally appropriate for youth. These strategies focus on children: their abilities, their interests and their enthusiasm.*

*Guiding this process is the wisdom of Jean Piaget, one of the great modern psychologists, who said, “Play is the work of childhood.” The first time that Charles Kuntzleman, co-founder of Fitness Finders® and co-author of this booklet, heard that phrase, he dedicated his career to children’s health and fitness.*

*Fitness Finders® partnered with Douglas Finley, founder of the Center for Children’s Running, to identify activities that fit well with the Mileage Club® philosophy of running for fun. The chosen activities are field tested, easy to organize and ideal for encouraging children to get moving.*

*I encourage everyone with a Mileage Club® program to put these ideas to good use. There is a treasure trove of simple, playful and effective running and walking activities that will meet the needs of the children at your school or agency.*

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## Chapter 2

# Good Form + Good Pacing = Good Times

Many children do not enjoy running because their bodies hurt (due to poor form) or they get exhausted too quickly (due to poor pacing). These two things often lead to a poor running experience. Good “times” and good experiences in running are dependent on good form and good pacing. **It’s FUNdamental.**

Let’s start with proper form. While this may not be razzle-dazzle stuff (that comes later), it is absolutely vital information. Running is a motor skill and, as with all motor skills, having proper mechanics is very important.

The following ideas will help children discover how to run, jog or walk smoothly, efficiently and, yes, even smartly. The good news: you do not have to be a skilled runner to be able to help others. We’ve outlined the basics of proper form and followed that up with ideas on how to teach them to children.

### Teacher’s Tips

Patricia Cunningham and Richard Allington, authors of *Classrooms That Work*, say that success precedes motivation. When children regularly experience success they become motivated, and not just by big successes, but also by seemingly small ones.



## Running Form

Efficient running form is a goal for coaches and runners alike, but mechanical differences make this goal easier for some and more difficult for others. There are, however, basic skills children can easily learn that will help them to better enjoy running.

**Posture** is very important. Run tall with the head up and eyes looking forward. Let the body lean forward just a bit, but do not bend at the waist.

The **arms and shoulders** are very important, as they have powerful influence on leg turnover; the faster the arms pump, the faster the legs move. Therefore, the arms need to be used properly. Keep the elbows bent at 90 degrees. Relax the arms and shoulders. As the arms move back and forth, do not allow the hands to cross the centerline of the body.

**Don't overstride.** With the body leaning slightly forward, the foot should strike the ground directly under the hips, not in front of the hips. This allows the foot to land on the ball or forefoot, rather than the heel, and greatly reduces the pounding and breaking action which can be tough on the ankles, knees and hips.

## Walking Form

These running principles apply to walking as well: good posture, proper arm movement and appropriate stride length. We all have seen walkers who, with their long strides and straight arms pumping back and forth, give the impression that they have mastered the technique. Well, maybe they haven't. Accentuating the stride length causes a breaking action each time the heel hits the ground. Instead, **focus on a comfortable stride length**, keeping the knees slightly unlocked and taking quick steps rather than long ones.


### Teacher's Tips

*Classrooms That Work* reminds us that success does not just happen, but is often the result of teachers who "engineer for success." To motivate children we must create opportunities for children to succeed, and not just occasionally.

## Playground Intervals

Many children are not physically or mentally ready to run—or even walk quickly—for longer than a few minutes. Try alternating short runs or power walks with a circuit on the playground equipment that includes climbing, balancing, hanging and whatever else you can find that builds strength and improves agility. A great exercise session could include four runs or power walks along with four playground circuits. For the serious adult athlete, this is called **interval training**, the interval being the period of active recovery between hard efforts. For children, this is play.

## Spokes of a Wheel

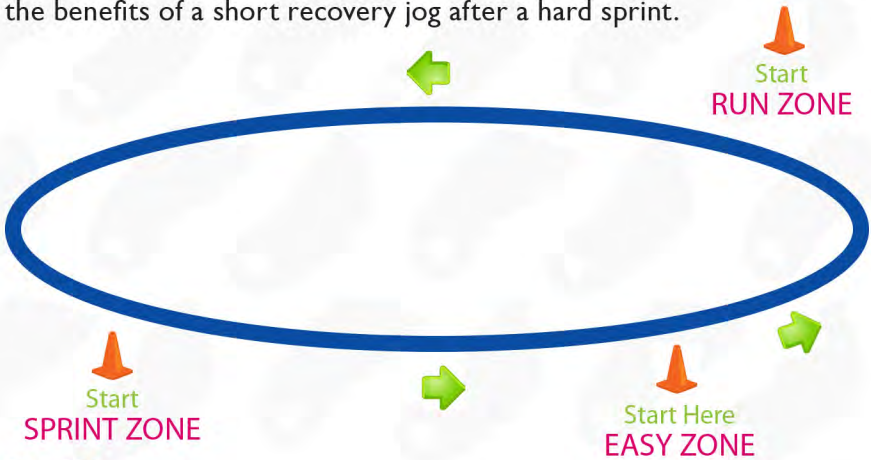


Imagine the spokes of a bicycle wheel. For this activity, each “spoke” consists of a different route and a teacher or volunteer standing in the “hub” at the center. Use landmarks to establish the routes: one route might be out around a tree and back to the start, another might be up a short hill and back, and another to the monkey bars and back. Divide the children equally among the spokes, and mark the start locations with cones. Send off the first child at each spoke.

When children return from running one spoke, they should move clockwise to the next spoke and go to the back of that line. To keep children moving as much as possible and not standing in line, you can have more than one child running each spoke at a time. Simply tap the next child on the shoulder when you want them to start. There might be three, four or even five children running at the same time on a longer spoke, but keep this number to one or two on shorter spokes.

## Zoned Out

Create a circular course 150 to 200 yards long. Use differently colored cones to establish three zones: an **Easy Zone** in which the children can walk or jog, followed by a longer **Run Zone** and then a short **Sprint Zone**. The end of the **Sprint Zone** is the start of the **Easy Zone**. Students may run the entire lap rather than walk or jog, but when they reach the **Sprint Zone** they must sprint. After a few times around the course, even the strongest children will discover the benefits of a short recovery jog after a hard sprint.



## Drills

Many adult runners use drills to improve their form, to strengthen their leg, hip and core muscles and to improve their range of motion. Many of these drills are the same things kids do on a playground: **skipping, running backwards, butt kicks, high-knee stepping, low walking, heel walking and quick feet**. A quick web search will turn up images of the proper form for these drills. Kids enjoy doing these activities for short periods of time.

For example, line the children up single file on the right side of a line of five or six cones (so that the cones are on their left). Send off the children one at a time, skipping their way down the line of cones. When they reach the last cone, they should go around it and then jog or walk back. Have them complete each drill twice. To keep things moving, send off one child every six seconds. Having the children go one at a time allows you to watch them and correct their form. Later, they can line up side by side and complete the drills simultaneously, but do not allow this to become a competition.

## Mileage Club® Challenge Series®

**Challenge Series® 1 and 2** include materials and awards for 21 different fun runs, with imaginative monthly themes and accompanying awards.

Sample monthly runs include the Pumpkin Run, the Turkey Trot and the Shamrock Shuffle. In these events, the focus is not on competition, but on proper preparation and ensuring that all runners have a good time.

To learn more, please visit [challengeseriesprogram.com](http://challengeseriesprogram.com)



### Obstacle Course Challenge

Use your playground to create an obstacle-course challenge. You will need an attendance sheet with each student's name, pens or pencils, and stopwatches (any digital watch will do) to time the students.

Create a course where the students have to run 30 to 40 yards to the playground equipment. Then, select a route for them to follow: across the monkey bars, down the slide, up the ladder, across the bridge, down the pole and back to the start. Obviously, the playground equipment will be different for each school, so just be creative with what you have. If you have children who cannot traverse the monkey bars, instead have them hang from one of the bars with arms fully extended (so that their feet don't touch the ground) for 15 seconds.

Record each student's time. As they run the course again, encourage each student to go faster and set a new personal record. If you have two adults timing the students, send the runners off separately so that there are always at least two students on the course at the same time. Keep the time sheet so that, when you repeat this activity, the students can try to set new personal bests.



## Chapter 7

# First Friday Specials

Most of the activities described in earlier chapters do not require much preparation or additional help. In this section, we've included some very popular runs and walks that will work best with assistance from one or more volunteers. With just a little help, these activities will be a breeze, and you can offer something that excites the students.

We call these activities **First Friday Specials**, for two reasons: first, because these runs are special, a privilege, something that the kids earn; second, because it is easier to recruit volunteers if you're asking for their help on the same day every month (i.e. the first Friday of the month).

### Teacher's Tips

Ownership is the result of setting and achieving goals. But for young runners to take ownership, the goals must be their own, not those set by the adults. Challenging children to do one more Mileage Club® lap is a great start, but move quickly into asking children how much more they can do tomorrow or next week.

