

An open letter about allowing our children to run marathons...

INTRO

Nine years ago Ben and our oldest son (8 years old at the time) attempted their first marathon together. Three sisters saw them finish and begged to do it the next year. Since then our family members have earned 50+ marathon medals, across three states, including ultra-marathons. On May 1, 2022, our family completed a marathon in Cincinnati with all 8 family members. Our oldest was 20 and our youngest was 6.

Our goal from the beginning has been to make running fun. Marathons have always been an optional activity and as our kids have gotten older the training for the marathons is 100% elective. We have never emphasized competition. Our marathons generally take 6-8 hours. We take playground breaks, walk, and eat and drink whatever we want. This is why, when our family hiked the 2,200 mile Appalachian Trail over the course of 5 months our children begged us to come home and use 3 of our 13 total days off trail, to take a “break” running our home marathon. A process we covered in great detail [in our book](#).

CONTROVERSY

Recently our family and parenting practices have come under fire for allowing our kids to run marathons. People have called us negligent, abusive, and ignorant. People claim and cite many credentials from coach, expert, and doctor. People have notified government agencies to take our kids from us and used their platforms to shame and coerce us to change our parenting methods.

SCIENCE AND MEDICINE

Critics against children running long distances generally cite obscure and unnamed sources that warn about singular, and often, unnamed health variables. The specific health risks vary from dehydration, to hyperthermia to electrolyte abnormalities. Usually one doctor is quoted or at best, one unnamed study. The biggest concern we have found revolves around children's bone development and growth plates. The [British Journal of Sports Medicine](#) published an article in 2019 that was compiled with the help of 22 medical and sport experts from four nations. In their most daunting statement they state that running “may place the youth runner at risk for injury to the musculoskeletal structures.” The key word is *may*. There is no direct link, there is no guarantee, there is no weight of evidence. The same paper concludes “To date, **there are no evidence or consensus-based guidelines identifying risk factors for injury and illness in youth runners, and current recommendations regarding suitable running distances for youth runners at different ages are opinion based.**” To make things more confusing the same group found “[a study](#) of youth marathon runners (ages 7–17 years old) reported an incidence injury rate of 12.9 per 1000 finishers; **half the rate of adult runners in the same race.**” According to this evidence one might conclude it's actually safer for kids to run than adults.

Other trusted organizations reflect similar lack of conclusion about kids running long-distances:

“There are few data on youth marathon runners and the most commonly asked questions of ‘can children run marathons?’ and ‘what are the health consequences?’ remain unanswered. **Expert opinion is split** with regard to running this distance at a young age. There have been many thousands of finishers <18 years old at the Los Angeles Marathon in an organized programme for youth running and nearly 300 finishers in the Twin Cities Marathon. The youngest child in these data sets was 7 years old. **There has not been any significant medical injury at these events.**

- [National Library of Medicine](#) (2007)

“if running is your child’s sport of choice, **there’s no clear-cut answer** when it comes to what’s the right age to give it a go”

- [Cleveland Clinic](#) (2019)

“there is no conclusive evidence that [running] causes any damage to kids yet we understand the fear introduced by society when you're doing something different.”

- [New York Times](#) (2009)

These findings have matched our anecdotal experience. After 20 years of taking kids on adventures including running, hiking, and biking they seem happier and healthier than ever. **Everyone looks at different studies but, any honest researcher must conclude that the answer of whether children should run-long distance is medically complex.**

BENEFITS

Good parenting is not just about avoiding risk. It is about evaluating risk against the potential benefits. The [CDC says](#) the top three avoidable causes of death for teens are suicide, [cancer](#), and heart disease. Running decreases the chances for all three. But the benefits go deeper. Since our kids started running we have seen an increase in their happiness and health. They spend more time outside, moving their bodies, seeing our city, and meeting interesting people. Running has helped them with fitness, given them a healthy way to cope with stress, and taught them how to monitor their bodies for fatigue, nutrition, hydration, and injury avoidance. Running has helped our kids grow in confidence, leadership, problem solving, endurance, and communication. Our kids have run beside and been coached by world class athletes. In a nutshell, our kids have experienced the same privileges of running that many adults have. But our unique benefit of running as a family has been the amount of time we are able to spend doing this activity together. Our kids have bonded with siblings, friends, and us, the parents, in a way we haven’t witnessed in other activities. In a world where most activities are separated by age groups it’s been valuable to have a sport we can practice together.

PARENTING IN PERIL

Of course, many critics will cite the cautions, official recommendations, and risks associated with running long distances that are also mentioned in many articles and arrive at the immediate

conclusion that it's safer to not run. "Common sense" they call it. While I agree that these cautions should be considered they need to be observed for what they are: opinions. Opinions are not laws, they're not scientific results, and they're certainly not an entire handbook for how any one family should parent. One of the loudest opinions has been Kara Goucher's - the two time American long-distance olympian. She recently posted [her opinion](#) of our child's activity:

"as an Olympic athlete, I promise you [running a marathon] is not good for the child."

Our culture celebrates people like Kara who push themselves to the brink and inspire us by what is possible with their bodies and minds. On youtube there are dozens of videos of humans on [the verge of collapse](#) displaying bravery, weakness, and tenacity at the finish lines of marathons. People who experience these moments in marathons or other endurance sports talk about how these are the pivotal moments that change their lives. They are moments of clarity. And instead of avoiding these moments many come back for more. They say it's addicting. Many marathon runners find life and purpose in the outer limits of society, in the "danger", in the gray...in the areas the experts call questionable. And yet we have created a world where we have not just discouraged kids from experiencing this same satisfaction. We have banned them. We have assumed that they are different, that they thrive in risk free environments. And we have sculpted their lives so these choices are not an option. When parents do give their kids these options we publicly shame them into hiding. This week, Child Protective Services showed up on our doorstep unannounced, saying they had received 7 phone calls from concerned citizens. They interviewed our children and have the power to take them away from us based upon their answers. With threats like this looming parents will often choose the conservative road even if it's worse for their children. But when our kids resort to sitting in front of a screen for 8 hours because it's the most exciting thing they know to do we blame THEM! This is the state of our parenting today.

FREEDOM AND HEALTH FOR ALL

Not too long ago another group of people were banned from these types of experiences. Until the 1984 LA Olympics (when Kara Goucher would have been 5 years old) women were not allowed to compete in the marathon or any distance over 1,500 meters (a distance that took them 4 minutes). The experts said "[women's health would be damaged by long-distance running](#)." It was not that they were discouraged. They were banned. People said women were not qualified to make the choice. They cited common sense, expert advice of existing running champions, and even the opinion of the medical community, which at the time, believed that long-distance running could cause their [uterus to fall out](#).

This is not hypothetical. This debate is still happening. This is what happens when those with power take control of other people's choices instead of empowering them to have agency over their own bodies.

We are not saying we have the answer on this topic. All that we're saying is that it deserves to be a conversation that's approached with humility. We have taught all our children that

having a certain gender, age, size, race or income bracket does not make anyone, including their own, voice less important. We have taught them that they are the most qualified to determine what their limits are, what they are capable of, and what a good life looks like. They have used their voice to choose long-distance running.

WE JUST WANT TO RUN

We never set out to reform race rules. We care more that our children are allowed to do a legal activity, in their city, that brings them joy and health, causes no harm to others and inspires many. We have had hundreds of people contact us saying that they entered a marathon or a 5k for the first time because they saw our children run. They thought running was for some elite group. We never set out to reform a system but we will also not support an outdated system of exclusion that primarily uses shame or rhetoric, especially when that system disavows us and then has the audacity to [label us](#) as [bandits](#). A bandit is someone who is attempting to cheat in an event or not willing to financially contribute to that event's success. My kids aren't bandits. We have and will continue to support the running community and its events in every way that we are allowed. But if you exclude my children and disallow them from official recognition, you cannot call them bandits for pursuing a legal, and free activity on public property that is healthy for them and their community.

A STORY

We close this letter with a story. In 1973 (11 years before the 1984 LA Olympics) someone entered the all male Boston Marathon under the pseudonym K.V. Switzer. It took two miles for the race organizers to realize K.V. Switzer was a woman named Katherine. Katherine was considered by the racing community to be a rule breaking race bandit. Her presence threatened the race, its insurance providers, its sponsors, and the sport. The running world deemed her incapable and reckless. The race directors [grabbed at her, attempting to forcibly stop her from competing](#) and tried to remove her number.

This week my 6 year old's son race results were removed from the website. His accomplishment was officially erased and disavowed. The race he trained for and fairly completed just like most of the adults three times his size. We will celebrate our son's choice and accomplishment regardless of the official record.

In the same way, Katherine did not let the official opinion or the race directors determine how she ran that day. She finished the marathon and went on to form a global series of races with Avon Cosmetics as a sponsor. It was the data and statistics from these long-distance races that led to the women's marathon finally making it to the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. The photo of her being tackled was eventually listed by Life Magazine as one of the "100 Photographs That Changed The World."

I'm thankful Katherine ran and paved the way for women everywhere. The 1970's running world deserved more. But we're not trying to change history. We just want our kids to be allowed to choose running. The children of today deserve more. They deserve heroes that aren't video game players. They deserve to know what's possible. We do not believe marathons are for

everybody. But we don't believe 8 hours of screen time is either. The traditional way of parenting is not working for many people. Our goal is to provide as many options to our children as possible so they can explore adventure, their limits and decide for themselves what their life looks like. These are complex conversations. We need more than black or white answers or shame for those who disagree to decide what is best for children. We don't know how we'll get there, or what others will say about it, but we'll see you at the finish line.

Ben and Kami Crawford

Proud parents of Dove, Eden, Seven, Memory, Filia, and Rainier Bib# 3695

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PS

- UPDATE: Our documentary [has been released](#).
- You can also read a letter our 15 year old daughter wrote to [Kara here](#).
- [FAQ Here](#)