

### Pushing a child will not work

Peta Bee

- 1 An analysis involving 25 million children over three decades carried out by the American Heart Association found that it takes children 90 seconds longer to run a mile than their



- counterparts 30 years ago. The findings, presented last year, revealed that heart-related fitness has dropped 5 per cent per decade since 1975.
- 2 Being a lifelong runner and the mother of a nine-year-old, these findings struck a particular chord and prompted me to play a small role in trying to 4 the trend. Four years ago I set up a running club in the Berkshire village where I live. We soon added a junior section and with support from other coaches, and enthusiastic parents, the numbers have swelled to 70 and are growing by the week.
- 3 As a fitness journalist, I have access to experts in sports coaching and psychology. What I've learnt is that children respond best to a range of activities, that they work better in groups than one-to-one and that the exercise must always be fun.
- 4 With younger children, don't "go for a run". Running as adults think of it (miles on the track or roads) should not start until a child is in his or her teens; a heavy training load shouldn't be introduced until he or she has stopped growing. Never forget that a child will lose interest and motivation if pressed into doing it simply because it is "good for them".
- 5 Most athletics and running clubs in the UK will accept children as young as nine as members, but they don't allow them to compete properly until they are 10 or 11. Before this age, children's fitness should mimic the kind of traditional playground running games that are stop-start in nature. Using this kind of approach, children will develop a level of strength and cardiovascular fitness that they can build on, with more running once they reach 12 to 14. I judge the success of a junior session by the level of laughter that it produces.

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