



CHILD'S PLAY

THE BEST WAY TO RAISE PHYSICALLY STRONG AND CAPABLE KIDS IS TO FUEL THEIR LOVE OF GAMES AND STOP FORCING THEM TO COMPETE AGAINST EACH OTHER

BY KATIE ARNOLD

EARLY LAST SUMMER, a friend asked me if I would take her 11-year-old daughter running. There was a local 5K coming up in a few weeks, and she thought I could help coach the girl to success in her first race.

I hesitated. Her question went right to the thorny heart of modern parenting. Most children these days aren't getting enough exercise or time to move their bodies outside. But many others are stressed out by an overdose of structured, competitive sports.

I must have looked conflicted, because my friend added enthusiastically, "It would be such good training for her!"

She wasn't the first person to assume that because I'm a competitive outdoor athlete, I must be an aggro parent, too—a Tiger Mom of the trail set who enters her kids in gnarly races. As an ultrarunner, I've conditioned myself to endure and even enjoy hours of mental and physical adversity in the mountains. And my online column for *Outside's* website, *Raising Rippers*, pulls straight from my experiences bringing up two daughters, now ages eight and ten, with my husband. We go rafting, take backcountry ski trips, and spend long days hiking at altitude. But there's a big difference between helping your kids feel confident in their abilities and pushing them to compete. When our family is out hiking or riding and the girls start to fuss, I give them food and water and tell them what I tell myself during the hardest parts of an ultra: You're stronger than you think you are, keep going. Yet I've never tried to make them racers.

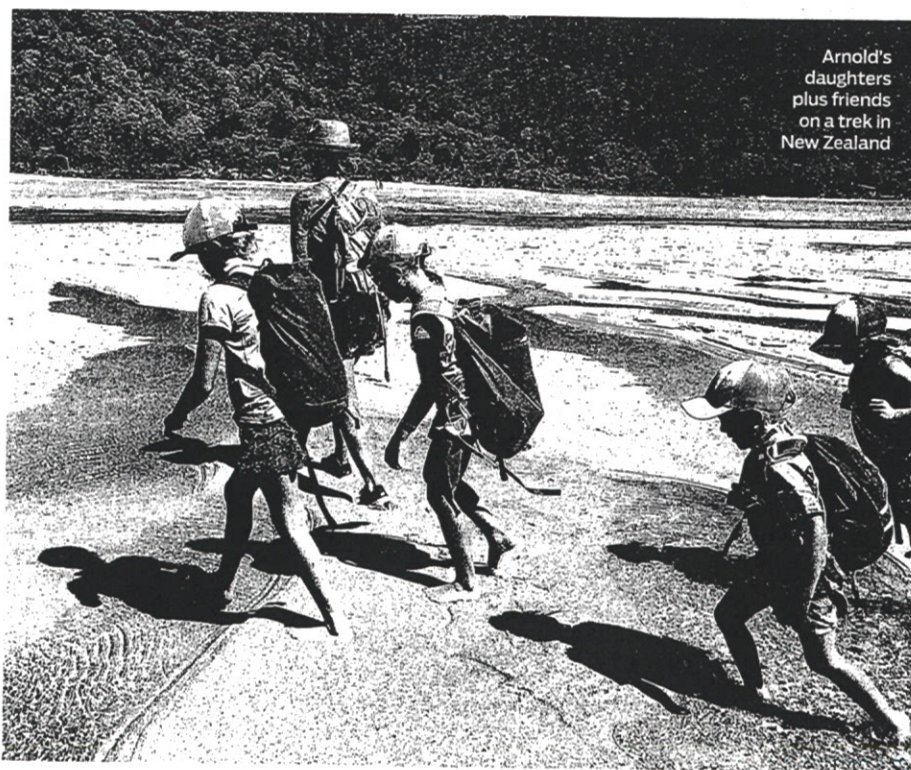
This is due mostly to my own path into sports. When I was seven and my sister, Meg, was ten, our dad suggested on a whim that we run a 10K. The idea was so outlandish, the mileage so meaningless, it seemed like a joke. We weren't runners, except in the way that most little kids in the late seventies were runners: we circled the bases during kickball, and I ran like hell to get away from the boy next door when he tried to smash snowballs into my face. Dad wasn't a runner, either. He preferred long bicycle rides in his

khaki short shorts and Tretorn sneakers, or rambles around the woods with his camera.

It took Meg and me close to two hours to jog, then limp, and finally stagger through the course. When at last we saw Dad waiting for us, I was filled with such a surge of relief that I broke into a sprint. We probably came in dead last, but it didn't matter. I'd felt the strange, buzzing euphoria of sticking with something that seemed impossible. I was hooked.

I ran the same 10K nearly every spring after that, not because Dad asked me to but because I wanted to. I got faster and sometimes won my age group (and, in my thirties and forties, the women's division outright). Still, I didn't join the track or cross-country team like Meg did. I just ran out the door clutching my yellow Sony Sports Walkman, blasting Bananarama. This was before kids' soccer leagues started at age three, before six-year-olds raced triathlons, before someone invented a world championship of balance biking for toddlers. Before childhood itself became a competitive sport.

Sometimes I wonder what might have happened if my parents had pressured me to compete. Maybe I would have run in college or gone further in the sport. But I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be racing ultramarathons in my mid-forties. As a girl, I ran because I felt free, because I made up stories in my head as I went, because I loved to run. The fact that I still do is because of what psychologists



Arnold's daughters plus friends on a trek in New Zealand

call intrinsic motivation: pursuing a goal for personal fulfillment rather than external rewards. “As humans, we’re more likely to stick with tasks that arise out of our own free will and choice,” says Jessica Lahey, best-selling author of *The Gift of Failure*. Intrinsic motivation creates a powerful positive feedback loop: you do something because you love it, and the more you do it, the more you improve, which motivates you to keep going. Too much intensity too soon, though, can be detrimental. According to a 2016 report published by the American Academy of Pediatrics, children who specialize in a single competitive sport before puberty are more likely to suffer from overuse injuries and burnout. Often they quit.

My girls are bright and strong-willed, with their own ideas and dreams and a fierce determination that’s sometimes maddening but mostly a relief. They’ll surely need it to navigate the years ahead. They climb, swim, ski, run, and play lacrosse for fun and friendship. Still, I can sense the competitive fires starting to flare. Which is just fine, though I have no plans to add any fuel. Instead, I’ll steal a page from my dad’s playbook: open the door and then let them decide if they want to walk through. Above all else, I’ll keep it fun.

That was the approach I chose with my friend last summer. “OK,” I told her, “I’ll take your daughter running. But only on trails, and it won’t be ‘training’—we’ll just have a good time.”

When I showed up at the trailhead a few days later, I was met not by one girl but by her and a gaggle of 25 friends—apparently word had gotten out about our plans. It had rained heavily the night before, and the woods were sloppy with mud. We set off at an easy pace, initially trying to skirt the shin-deep puddles. But pretty soon the kids charged right in, shrieking and falling and getting back up. It looked like they’d gone crazy on a natural Slip ‘n Slide.

At the turnaround about a mile and a half in, an eight-year-old boy named Johnny took off his sneakers. One by one, the other kids followed suit, laughing as they sprinted through the woods, their bare feet barely touching the ground. They weren’t running, they were just playing. As I lingered behind them, it dawned on me that after all my miles and races, this is why I still run—to feel young and free and giddy with possibility. So I kicked off my shoes and chased them all the way back to the trailhead.

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Age-Appropriate Adventure

When and how to introduce your mini-me to your favorite sports

Children are much more likely to enjoy outdoor activities—and stick with them—if they start out at the right moment in their physical and cognitive development. Kids also do best when they’re allowed to explore, instead of being cajoled into ever more challenging situations. “Too many parents approach sports with a fixed mindset, saying, ‘We’ve got to get to the end of this trail,’” says Paul Dreyer, CEO of Avid4 Adventure, which instructs kids ages three and up at camps in Colorado and California. “You’ll have a lot more success if you say, ‘Let’s go get better at the two skills you learned last week.’” Here, he offers guidelines for introducing kids to four common sports, but his overarching advice to focus on fun and go slow applies to all manner of activities. —J.B.

Biking

→ Most kids are ready for a balance bike (a ride with no pedals) by their third birthday. They may scoot slowly at first, but eventually they’ll be lifting both feet off the ground for long stretches. Even then, however, there’s no reason to race out and get a real bike.

→ When they upgrade to a pedal bike—usually around age five—keep it simple: a coaster brake and no gears.

→ Add gears and hand brakes when they have demonstrated the requisite coordination to manage all these functions simultaneously (and have hands large enough to reach the levers).

→ Throughout their training, talk through hazards (pedestrians, street crossings) and establish rules, like leaving ample space between riders. By tracking their ability to assess risks, you’ll know when they’re ready to cruise the neighborhood alone.

Climbing

→ This sport comes naturally to toddlers, but you can fuel their passion by joining them on a playground structure or boulder. If they get stuck, ask if they want to move a foot or hand one more time, but avoid telling them where to put it.

→ When they’re around six, take them to a climbing gym. Show them how

belaying works, teach them knots, and get them used to checking equipment. When they tucker out, spend time watching talented climbers of all ages for inspiration.

→ Once they have solid skills, head to an outdoor crag for top-roping. As you venture farther afield, make them earn the right to belay you or lead climb—big moments that probably shouldn’t arrive until they’re in their teens.

Paddle Sports

→ Don’t wait for your kids to be able to swim. Put them in a PFD and take mellow lake or bay outings together on a sit-on-top kayak, paddleboard, or canoe.

Have them float in the PFD, too, so you’ll both know what to expect if they fall in.

→ Once they’ve gotten comfortable, give them kid-size paddles so they can “help.” Don’t sweat their technique—just let them learn how it feels to move the water and steer the boat.

→ When kids show an interest in managing their own watercraft, paddle alongside them and have conversations about factors like wind and other boaters. Wait until they’re at least seven before you let them go out alone—in calm conditions while you’re on the beach with another boat.

→ Moving up to rivers, the ocean, or any waterway with significant traffic means starting the process all over again.

Skateboarding

→ The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends kids be supervised when skating until age ten, but you can get them rolling much earlier. Before they ever stand on a board, make them put on a helmet, plus wrist, elbow, and knee pads. Explain that falling is part of skating and have them practice tumbling in their gear.

→ Make them stand with one foot forward and then the other a few times to decide which stance is more comfortable. When you head for the blacktop, begin with slow pushes and glides. Have them practice stepping off the board to avoid a fall and sliding a foot to brake. Show them how to turn in a full circle, riding forward and backward. When they can consistently balance on flats and gentle slopes, they’re ready to try the shallowest bowls at your local skate park.