

This is a printer friendly version of an article from www.fosters.com
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Article published Oct 26, 2008

Girls on the Run for health, self-esteem

DOVER — With young girls growing up faster than ever and faced with all sorts of pressures at every turn, one organization is trying to help by providing a place where girls learn and are prepared for a lifetime of self-respect and healthy living.

Girls on the Run is a nonprofit, after-school program that uses activities like running, playing games, and discussing issues every girl faces, to help preteen girls build self-esteem and improve their physical and emotional health.

Fifteen local girls, between the ages of 8 and 13, met on a recent Tuesday afternoon to run laps around the Woodman Park baseball field, talk about their emotions and how to express them and to have fun. These girls have been meeting after school every Tuesday and Thursday since the beginning of September and will continue to meet until the end of November when the program will be completed with each girl finishing a 5K, or 3.1 mile, race. According to N.H. Executive Director of Girls on the Run, Jennifer Hubbell, it isn't whether the girls run the whole time during the race, but the fact that they complete it that matters.

"I always tear up every time you see them come to the finish line," she said. "Their faces are both exhausted but so thrilled that they did something they never thought they could do."

Girls on the Run was founded in Charlotte, N.C., in 1996 by marathon runner and four-time Hawaii Ironman triathlete Molly Barker. The program has evolved and now has more than 160 locations across the country and Canada. The New Hampshire chapter began in March 2001 and currently includes the towns of Dover, Madbury, Exeter, Hampton and Stratham. The program's target audience is girls in elementary school, but not because they might be molded into track stars.

"It is so much more than just the running," Hubbell said. "These girls are at the age where it is still OK for them to be silly and have fun and not worry about the things that they will be faced with in middle school and high school. The program teaches them that being the girls that they are is a good thing. Girls today grow up way too fast."

One of the many slogans of the program is, "helping girls get out of the girl box." The girl box is defined as a place where girls are taught that they are valued more for their outward appearance than the character inside. This way of thinking often results in low self-esteem and a distorted body image that can lead to eating disorders, teen pregnancy and substance abuse. Girls in the program are taught to say "I belong just the way I am."

Different lessons are covered each week the girls meet for "practice," with themes like keeping promises and valuing what's really important, to handling gossip and bullying, to a recent week's lesson of appropriately expressing feelings and emotions.

The girls began the afternoon sitting around two picnic tables where the coaches, Susan

Hoag, Janet Gnall and Nicole Kurr and all volunteers, each took turns asking the girls to act out different emotions and feelings such as bored, excited and confident.

Next the girls separated into two teams to play in a relay. Each girl was given a card with an emotion on it and when they ran around an orange cone set up on the field and came back to their team cheering them on, they had to decide which box their card went into, the box for negative emotions or the positive box.

Even though a few girls got tired and had to have a coach go out and run with them, their teammates never stopped cheering. Neither team won or lost. The game was played for exercise and fun, not to declare a winner.

"It's all about getting out there, creating friendships and having fun," Hubbell said. "They aren't competitive at all and at the end of the day they don't realize that they could have just ran a mile or a more."

After the relay, the girls created a circle with the coaches and stretched as they talked about times during their school day that they saw different emotions. "I saw a lot of people happy at school today," Christine Verrill, 8, said. "There were some sad kids though, too."

After stretching the girls ran laps around the baseball field. After each lap they received a sticker and once all the girls finished they were rewarded with a purple snap-on bracelet.

The sense of friendship and family is encouraged in everything the girls do during their practices. When running laps, one girl fell behind and ended up running the last few by herself. Because she tried so hard and collected her stickers just like the other girls, her friends and teammates celebrated when she was done by doing a small cheer for her and yelling "superstar."

At the end of the 10-week program, the girls will run the 5K race in Newfields. The girls' families are encouraged to run with them and cheer them on.

"I have a lot of friends here," 8-year-old Emma Goodridge said. "I look forward to this every week. It's fun."

For more information about Girls on the Run visit their website at www.girlsontherun.org.