

***Girls on the Run: A Unique Approach to Childhood Obesity***  
***By Molly Barker, M.S.W.—Founder***

This is not an academic paper. This is an idea, a belief...a philosophy.

In 1996, I started Girls on the Run, in an effort to help girls step out from the confines of the Girl Box...the place many girls go around the age of fifth grade—where definitions of femininity are found in magazines, MTV images and a cosmetic and plastic surgery industry, gone haywire. The girl who knew all the answers becomes the girl who hides in the back of the class; the girl who could beat the boys at races becomes the girl who feels ashamed of her strong body and legs; the girl who giggled with her friends becomes the girl who is silent and afraid. Not coincidentally, psychologists believe fifth grade is around the same time that a large number of mental disorders begin to crop up: substance abuse, eating disorders, early sexual contact and plummeting self-esteem. The message of the box is to do more, be more, give more—because you are never good enough, never pretty enough, never smart enough, never sexy enough, ***never enough***.

Never measuring up has been the tact that the fitness and health industry has used for years. The assumption of the industry has been that once you are fit enough, thin enough, healthy enough...then you will be happy. The only problem is...there is ***always*** room for improvement. The “getting to there” never actually happens. Happiness isn’t necessarily found in winning the championship trophy, six-pack abs or lowered body fat and cholesterol levels. We are always in a space of not measuring up. Hence, diets fail, exercise regimens fail and people simply give up.

***Girls on the Run is a 12-week curriculum-based program for 3<sup>d</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade girls that combines training for a 5k run/walk with games that enhance whole-person health. The program started in Charlotte, NC in 1996 with 13 girls and now reaches over 50,000 girls in 110 U.S. and Canadian cities. For more information please visit our website at [www.girlsontherun.org](http://www.girlsontherun.org).***

Several key concepts which are unique to the Girls on the Run program:

1. Exercise, sports and fitness are a means to an end...not the end itself. The reason girls love our program is the emphasis of what goes on between “the start and the finish line.” Training for the 5k is the reason we come together... so of course an outcome of the program is a healthier, leaner young girl; however the outcomes on which we put the most emphasis are: values learned through healthy friendships; better social skills and the attainment of tangible life skills so girls can confront and deal with the many challenges brought on by living a full and healthy life
2. We encourage girls to *celebrate the process of achieving their goals, rather than the goal itself*. We celebrate a girl’s courage, perseverance, kindness, compassion and capacity for independent thinking. Completing the course-end 5k is one outcome of possessing those character traits. So too is a healthier body. However our focus remains on developing character that leads to possessing a positive attitude and the ability to speak up for oneself.
3. Girls on the Run is non-competitive, upbeat, authentic, real and genuine. Every girl, regardless of income, body size and ethnicity is welcome. Whether she is interested in sports or into “fashion” she will discover common ground with other participants. All girls, whether they are into sports or not are capable of the life “skills” we are encouraging them to develop...kindness to one another...celebration of each other’s gifts...strong-willed and independent thinking.
4. Every person comes to the world with a purpose. The process of living is simply the peeling back of layer after layer to discover the ‘purpose’ around which our bodies are wrapped. Taking care of our bodies is necessary...so that our purpose for being here has plenty of time to come to fruition. Being responsible for our own physical health takes on a far greater meaning when considered from this angle—it becomes a philosophy, a lifestyle and provides a spiritual approach to living a physically healthy life.

***“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience....  
we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”***