

Teaching Boys To Run Away From School- In Central Park, New York City

Three Seasons Of Running September to June

1. Fall Cross Country
2. Winter Running Group
3. Spring Track

Six Key Points

1. It's Not for Everyone, But Actually It Is

Everyone is welcome to join for one, two, or all three seasons. Some boys join because they want to compete seriously in Fall XC and/or Spring Track. Other boys stay for one season to help prepare for an upcoming interscholastic sport, ie Fall XC as preparation for Basketball, Winter Running Group as preparation for Lacrosse. Several boys have entered the program in the Fall of 5th Grade and stayed for all 3 seasons until they graduate. Winter Running Group is non-competitive, *but historically gets the most participants*. We had 40 boys this year, nearly 25% of the total Middle School and Upper School population.

2. Therapy In Disguise

When we're out running, the boys will talk about things *that are not openly spoken about inside of school*. We run side by side, and that may be part of it, similar to sitting next to a boy while driving in car. Family concerns, problem with classes, upcoming tests or applications for secondary schools, it all comes out when we're in the park. We share stories and observations about ourselves, our personal histories, our families, our pets, and other common circumstances that seem relevant and tend to be in the context of our "inner circle" of running lore and acceptable subject matter.

3. The Park Is The Classroom

There's a lot to learn in the park. Cyclists, passerby, tourists, police vehicles, other runners, the occasional homeless person, and other school groups are all out there. The trees, fields, rocks, cliffs, stream, lakes, and a lot of wildlife are all there too. There are safety concerns, crossing the Park Drive every day is potentially dangerous. The places and areas where we run are all named and learned as part of the lore of the program: The Reservoir, The Bridle Path, The Old Fort, The Big White Bench, Belvedere Castle, The Woodchip Paths, The Little Lake, The Big Tunnel, The Little Tunnel, The Great Hill, these are our weekly places and daily objectives. Running each day *literally broadens our view of the city and of nature, and of each other*.

4. Creativity Likes Company

Many ideas, plans, and projects are created while we run. A lot of funny, imaginary characters are brought to life, a lot of comedy is launched. *Ideas create other ideas* and the group shares them, embellishes them, and then the thread continues during the season and throughout the year. We make up silly songs and poems, ie: "Ode To A Robotic Bunny With Low Self Confidence", and we solve a lot of problems collectively too. Deciding each day's run or workout tends to be somewhat democratic and I am always willing to listen to new concepts. ie We are currently holding our own "track meet" with different races each day and a point system all devised by a 6th Grader.

5. Boys Really Should Be Boys

Running in the Park, using sticks for swords, hooting in the tunnels, dropping twigs into the streams, racing each other, being silly, and sharing all of this with friends, is *essential to childhood which is under siege in our culture*. As a current colleague/former student said, "The Running Program gives the boys a place to just be boys."

6. "Yes", Not "No"

Finally, the ethic of the program is "Yes", not "No". I want boys who think they can't run to discover they can, over time, with patience. I want boys who are competitive to compete and strive for medals at the races and meets. I want boys who need a break from the pressures of school to get outside and unwind. I want to say "Yes", and when I say "No", it's related to unacceptable behavior, selfishness, being critical of others, or being mean spirited. I tell them that 50 years from now I want them to go out for a run and still feel that *boyish abandon and sense of joy which they are experiencing now*.