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Providing Resources to the Learning Differences Community



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A Reason to Run



There are almost four million people with learning differences; almost one million of these children have trouble focusing. While we call them learning differences usually thinking of the school day, learning happens everywhere. A child with trouble focusing can have a lot of difficulty playing on a sports team or developing that "eye of the tiger" that is needed for competition. Programs are now available for children whose brain works differently, children who may have trouble staying focused on the ending goal. This is the story of one woman's passion, her son's diagnosis and how she found the team of volunteers to make her dream run.

Meet Aleta Mills-Stubin

Last year, I started Running MATES (**M**aking **A** Team **E**xperience **S**uccessful), a running program for children who have difficulty with social interaction. The program helps kids learn social skills and train for a 5K race. Although I started the program with only the help of my husband, I have been lucky to gain volunteers as it grows.

I started Running MATES with a lot of ideas and a strong desire to make the program happen. After the initial development of a program outline, it became apparent that I could not bring my idea to fruition without outside help. There were overwhelming start-up considerations. People with more experience in these areas became involved, such as a lawyer, a marketing professional, a graphic designer and a website developer. Most volunteered their services, but others provided services at a discounted rate. Without their help, it would have been easy to become discouraged before the program even got started.

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Running MATES also needed people to run with us for safety, as well as for motivation and encouragement. Because we meet on the campus of Emory University, the school was a natural pool of volunteers. Through phone calls and emails, I made connections with the Emory women's cross country team and Project Sunshine. The children beamed when these runners joined us and seemed to treasure the company of volunteers beyond that of their parents. Having larger groups of volunteers increased the likelihood of finding someone with whom they "clicked." One child spent an entire run making Pokémon noises for his running partner to identify (and she could!). Another child liked to hold onto his running partner for support.

We really saw the value of our volunteers when some of them surprised us by coming to cheer at the 5K run for which the children had been training. They came with a sign with all the children's names and moved around the course, so we could see them multiple times. Everyone was so happy to see them. After the race, one child was overcome with emotion and tears at the completion of his goal and the support of the volunteers.

Finding volunteers

It is not always easy to find volunteers. Even if someone has an interest, there may be scheduling conflicts. The key to growing a group of involved volunteers is providing different types of volunteer experiences. For Running MATES, running partners are the most obvious type of volunteer needed. However, we also need people to help behind the scenes with event planning, marketing, and fundraising.

Recruiting potential volunteers should be thought of like a web. Start out with direct contacts, and provide information that can be easily shared with others. Social marketing makes this easier, but it still requires the development of written materials. Here are some ways to build or increase your volunteer base:

- Create a short email describing your organization and sharing your website and social networking sites, such as a Facebook page. Email everyone you know and ask them to share it with others.
- Be active on your social networking sites as a reminder to people about your organization.
- Hang flyers in strategic places and create listings in resources guides. For example, Running MATES has flyers at Sensations Theraput and a listing with Kids Enabled.
- Create a standard response to potential volunteers so that you can respond to inquiries quickly.
- Create a contact list and send out periodic newsletters via an email marketing program such as Constant Contact or iContact. Be sure to include links to forward your email, join your mailing list or volunteer.
- Reach out to larger, umbrella organizations that have more volunteers than opportunities.

Making the volunteer experience fun and meaningful

The best volunteer base is the one you already have. To retain volunteers, the experience should be as easy as possible, fun, and meaningful.

- Make volunteering easy. I recommend using an online sign up board, such as Sign Up Genius or Volunteer Spot. These provide useful information to volunteers, email reminders of volunteer dates and times, and are a good organizational tool.
- Provide volunteers with explicit instructions. I provide my volunteers with: dates and times, the address and/or directions, a bulleted list of what to do, and the underlying goals for the volunteers.
- Appreciate your volunteers. Thank your volunteers profusely. Share with them their importance to your group. I give my repeat volunteers t-shirts so they really feel like a part of our team.

The feedback I received about our volunteers has been overwhelming positive. The parents and

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children said they love running with them and are so appreciative of their time. And the same volunteers continue to run with us – that is the best indicator that they enjoy it!

Aleta Mills-Stubin came up with the idea for Running MATES while running a half marathon and thinking about her own son whom had just been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. The former attorney wanted to create a program that would benefit more than just her son. Running MATES is a lesson-based curriculum and training program that can be adapted to children around the world. Children ages 5 to 12 who have trouble with social interaction meet each week to run. The children learn social skills and train for a 5k race. Visit RunningMates.org for more information.

For more information on social interaction and sports visit:

<http://thebestkindofdifferent.com>

<http://www.parenting.com/article/ask-dr-sears-coping-with-asperger-syndrome>

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