

# HEAD OVER HEELS FOR BAREFOOTING

By Bill Ades

**W**ith all the great advancements in health and wellness our society has made, it is ironic that NS3 signs ("No shirt, no shoes, no service") still exist. Some establishments, regardless of whether they've posted a sign or not, will even eject a good, paying customer for violating what they claim to be a health regulation. It is unfortunate that people are actually convinced that going barefoot is uncivilized and unsanitary.

Many health experts, however, are in agreement that bare is the healthiest state for your feet to be in. In his book, *Take Off Your Shoes and Walk*, Simon Wikler, D.S.C., makes the case that practically all men's and women's shoes have no relation to the natural shape of the human foot. "Most adults' foot trouble would either not exist or would be much less bothersome if properly shaped shoes had been worn during childhood or, better yet, if those people had gone barefoot," he writes.

Wikler details that until the Renaissance, when the elevated heel and pointed toe were introduced, there were no known foot troubles. For example, there is no record of foot troubles in Biblical times, as compared to modern times. Furthermore, Wikler describes a study that was performed between 1957 and 1960, comparing people whose parents refused to allow them to walk barefoot to those whose parents encouraged it. The results of a barefoot childhood were:

- Fewer instances of deformed toes
- Greater foot flexibility
- Greater ability to spread the toes
- Denser muscles on the bottom of the feet
- Greater agility than those who had never gone barefoot
- Better hip circumduction and more flexibility of the gluteal and hamstring muscles (demonstrated by a greater ability to touch their toes when their knees were held stiff).

Adults who go barefoot experience the following benefits:

- Naturally shaped feet, including straighter toes free of corns, hammer toes, bunions and calluses in the wrong places
- Well-shaped legs resulting from a natural and balanced gait
- A more natural motion, free of the weight brought on by shoes
- Prevention of blisters, ingrown toenails and plantar warts

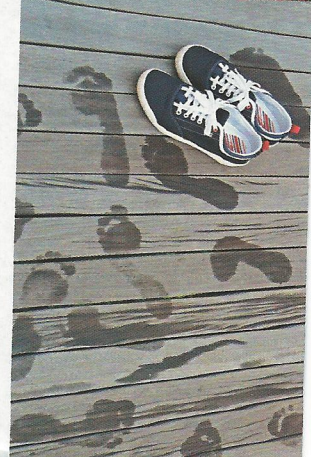
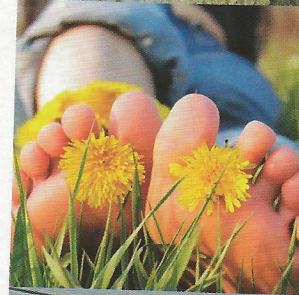
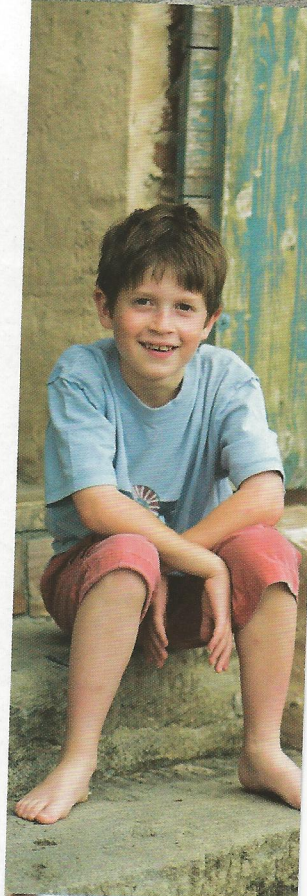
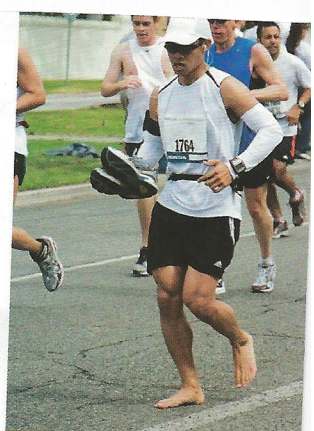
## Barefoot Running

In recent times, more and more people have taken to running barefoot, something that is normally practiced by runners from Kenya. Running barefoot might sound far-fetched, but it's a growing practice. In 2001, Australian physical therapist Michael Warburton wrote that running barefoot decreases the likelihood of ankle sprains and chronic injuries, such as plantar fasciitis. Shoes actually increase the risk of a sprain because they make runners unaware of the foot's position.

In 2005, Nike released the Nike Free, a shoe that "lets your foot run free on any surface," designed to emulate the foot in its bare state. According to Nike, "Studies show that barefoot training leads to stronger feet, that stronger feet lead to a stronger body, and that natural movement enhances agility."

Ever since I took up running barefoot, I've found that my performance has improved multifold. I can run faster, since I have nothing weighing down my feet. I also cover more distance, since not only do my feet tire far less, but my circulation is better than when I used to wear sneakers, and my feet hurt much less.

Also, my endurance has increased considerably, because my feet can concentrate, running in their natural form, rather than my brain trying to send extra waves from guessing how my foot is supposed to land. Sneaker companies like Nike are trying to







# barefooting+kids

By Jeanne Ohm, D.C.

Barefooting is especially recommended for children! Keeping children's feet free to move and breathe without the confines of shoes is a healthy choice with lasting effects. Walking barefoot helps build arches and strengthens the muscles and ligaments in the feet and ankles. Even walking on uneven ground, such as sand and grass, is good for an infant's feet, since it makes the muscles work harder and actually strengthens and structurally develops the feet.

Tracy Byrne, a U.K.-based podiatrist specializing in podopediatrics, notes, "The more parents know about the structure of children's feet, the more we can prevent footwear-related damage being done." In 2007, the podiatry journal *The Foot* published research showing that when young, developing feet are forced to conform to shoes, significant unnatural structural and functional changes result.

"Toddlers keep their heads up more when they are walking barefoot," says Byrne. "The feedback they get from the ground means there is less need to look down, which is what puts them off balance and causes them to fall down."

Doctors of chiropractic agree. Children keeping their heads up improves their posture, spinal balance and overall nerve system function. Additionally, there is evidence that the natural motion of bare feet positively affects overall neurological function and brain development. Other than the spine, the foot is the anatomical region which contains the most proprioceptive sensory receptors, distinctive nerve circuits that pertain to spatial relationships and affect numerous aspects of brain and neurological development. Because of the magnitude of this sensory input, natural, unrestricted movement of the feet is vital for overall neurological well-being. These factors have lifelong consequences for a healthy, functional nervous system.

When choosing footwear for your children, barefoot is best, and appropriate far more often than we normally allow. When shoes are absolutely needed, soft-soled, comfortable shoes are best. They might cost a bit more, and they might not fit in with the trendy styles that flash and shine the latest cartoon hero, but they permit maximum movement, and the imperative flexibility with that motion. This will support the healthiest development of the feet...and of the baby's developing brain and nerve system.

