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Discipline: Five Ways the Martial Arts Help Our Kids

Dylan Casill

Communications 105

University of Phoenix

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Our children face potentially life-changing, if not life-threatening, decisions every day. Drugs, bullies, violence, gangs, and predators wait around every corner. Our children are their targets. So how does a parent arm his children with the tools necessary to make the right decisions while they are not under his watchful eye? Confidence and discipline are the keys to a child's safety, and martial arts can be the method. That's why I believe parents should seriously consider enrolling their children in a martial arts school.

KickStart Their Defense

The martial arts have been recognized by many communities as a way to give our kids the ability to face the day-to-day pressures of our world. One of the more successful and nationally recognized programs is the KickStart program founded by Chuck Norris, actor and martial arts champion (Atkin, 2000). The KickStart program, originally founded to combat drugs and gang recruiting, is now a part of the curriculum of over twenty-five Houston, Texas, area schools and twelve Dallas, Texas, area schools. What has been the outcome? According to the program's web site ("Why Martial Arts?"), "The results after nine years of operation have been phenomenal. Attendance rates are improving steadily, self-discipline, self-esteem, and respect for others are on the rise, and the sense of TEAM and 'belonging' is evident at each of the schools."

The Magic of Martial Arts

So what is it about martial arts that is so influential on our kids? The main tenets of martial arts are discipline, honor, confidence, and perseverance. Children are started in the program on a level playing field. To become more senior in the program, children must earn belts, a feat which ensures that they respect the effort required to achieve that level. The martial arts are comprised

of a set of choreographed moves called “forms” that progressively build to the next level of difficulty. Each set of moves relies upon knowledge of previously learned moves. Knowledge of these moves is tested by senior belt members in the organization and recognized through the colored belt system.

As each student progresses through the belt system, each belt becomes progressively more difficult to obtain. Subsequent belt advancements require knowledge of more moves, stances and forms. As part of their progression through the belt system, senior-belt holders are given more and more responsibility in the organization and for the success of their lower-ranked peers. This responsibility helps facilitate a sense of belonging and team spirit among all the belts.

Just Say No to Violence

Some critics say that martial arts teach our children violence. That criticism is flatly wrong. Martial arts organizations demand that students respect with the skills being taught. Most organizations employ very steep penalties if they hear of their students fighting, bragging, or bullying. "I have a rule in my school, that if I even hear that you are fighting, you come before the class and I take your belt; you become a no-belt," says Charlie Foxman, owner of the Midwest Martial Arts Academy in St. Louis. “In 12 years of teaching, I've only had to take three belts” (Atkin, 2000). Children attending martial arts training rarely, if ever, need to use their skills. They feel confident, walk confident, talk confident, and show confidence in their actions. This mentality is enforced through every tenant of the martial arts regimen. *Forbes* magazine explains:

Respecting age is incumbent on the martial arts youngster away from class as well. Most studios have rules to follow at home, including speaking properly to adults and not interrupting them, being neat and clean, doing homework and being kind ("Children will not use any karate moves on their family members or friends," one handbill advises). Courtesy and humility,, foreign concepts to many American youths, arc in. Smoking,

drinking and drugs are out. Those who stray off course may find their uniformed rank reduced. What might seem corny or harsh coming from mom or dad (if one is around) is hip when issued by a martial arts master. (Ferguson, 1995)

If a child with martial arts training is cornered by a bully or even worse, a predator, he or she has the tools necessary to escape the situation as quickly as possible. This ability reassures most parents, since they know that their children can defend themselves. Fundamentally, children in martial arts are no longer seen as potential victims, so the confrontations rarely happen in the first place.

Isn't it Dangerous?

A concern of many parents is the danger of sparring. Sparring is the application of the forms and combinations learned in martial arts, usually against a peer opponent. Sparring is an integral part of applying the techniques learned, and like football or hockey, is performed with safety equipment and strict rules of engagement. There is danger in any type of contact sport, but with proper supervision and guidance, the danger is controlled and minimized. A majority of schools also sponsor competitions, but participation is not usually requirement of the program or advancement.

A Way of Life

Many organizations have taken innovative approaches to blending the tenets of martial arts into the children's everyday lives. The North Austin Tae Kwon Do Club encourages good grades by placing stars on the uniform sleeve of children who earn all A's and B's on their report cards. "I feel it is important to integrate martial arts lessons into all facets of a child towards every goal they pursue" (Atkin, 2000). The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Diamond, 2004) describes how a Lilburn, Georgia, organization takes a different approach: "The children receive

cards that parents and teachers use to rate their behavior and schoolwork. The ratings are heavily weighted toward promotion tests for higher belts” (p.JJ1).

Martial arts is a proven, effective method of building self-esteem, self-discipline, and goal oriented behavior. It also provides our children with the means to protect themselves when presented with a threat. Martial Arts is not the panacea to all of our children’s problems. However, it gives them a solid foundation to cope with the pressures they endure throughout childhood, setting the patterns and behaviors for a successful transition to adulthood.

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