

How To Give Your Child A Head Start In Life Through Martial Arts Training

by Mike Pace

Introduction

I wrote this booklet to give parents a better understanding of what the martial arts really are and why it's the very best thing they could do for their child. Too often I've heard a concerned parent say, "I don't want my son or daughter learning something so violent. There's enough violence in this world, my child doesn't need to be exposed to any more." Nothing could be further from the truth providing they have the right instructor and the right school.

In the pages that follow, I hope to show you the tremendous benefits your child can obtain from martial arts and give you some valuable tips on how to choose the right instructor and the very best school in your area.

Why do I feel qualified to do this? Well, I've been formally involved in the martial arts since 1967. I own several schools and have an ongoing relationship with the owners and instructors of several of the most successful martial arts schools in the country. I currently hold a seventh (Dan) degree black belt and am involved on a daily basis with students and parents.

In the next few minutes I will show you beyond a doubt, "how to give your child a head start in life," through martial arts training.

Michael A.Pace 7th Dan Goshin-Ryu Karate

Why Should My Child Study The Martial Arts

It's generally accepted that children should be exposed to as many diverse activities as possible to broaden their horizons, help stretch their interests and hone their skills. With the many activities available to today's children, why is martial arts training so important? Actually, there are many reasons. Consider these:

1. Many activities are either seasonal or short lived in nature. They don't give the child the benefit of a long term continuous learning and growing experience.
2. Most sports endeavors deal strictly in physical activities and add very little to mental and personal development.
3. Many activities are team oriented and while team-work is certainly important, it doesn't allow for individualized training, systematic personal growth and differ-

ences in ability.

4. Competition in many activities can be so fierce that if a child doesn't perform as well as another teammate he/she feels like a loser (which is horrible for self esteem).

5. Many public school or town run activities are sometimes unfair because the reason a child:

a) makes the team b) gets to play a certain position, c) makes the first squad, etc., is because they (or their parents) are friends with the coach or their children. This can be very frustrating to the child and parents as well.

6. Martial arts training, while usually done in groups, allows a child to work, develop, improve and grow at their own pace.

7. Many martial arts programs are extremely motivational in nature. This encourages a child to stay involved for long periods of time, enabling them to reap the benefits of self accomplishment.

8. Most martial arts programs use a belt ranking system. If broken down properly, it enables a child to have a series of winning experiences which many doctors and educators agree is essential to improve self esteem and self image.

9. Martial arts develop and improve concentration which can have a major impact on school grades.

10. Martial arts programs emphasize and teach self discipline which many educators and national leaders believe to be a serious missing element in today's youth.

11. Martial arts teach hand-eye co-ordination, motor development skills and improve overall co-ordination which helps a child in all other physical activities.

12. Martial arts programs teach self respect and respect for others.

13. Good martial arts programs teach goal setting which becomes a practice for life.

There Are So Many Different Martial Arts...Which One Is Best?

Personally I am an instructor of Okinawan Karate. You might expect that I would say that "it is the best style or type of martial art" for your child. Not so ! Any martial art can give your child all the benefits listed earlier. It's not the art or style that matters. It's the school's philosophy, the instructors and their attitudes that makes all the difference! However, just to familiarize you with the different arts, I've listed a few with a brief description.

Karate - An art primarily involved with kicking, punching and striking techniques. Balanced approximately 50 / 50 with the use of hands and feet. Usually Okinawan or Japanese in heritage.

Tae Kwon Do, Tang Soo Do, Hwarang Do - Very similar to karate except with a heavy emphasis on kicking. Korean in heritage.

Ju-Jitsu - A grappling art which uses pressure points, joint locks, strikes and throws. Relies on using the opponents force against them. Usually Japanese in heritage.

Hapkido - Similar to Ju-Jitsu with perhaps more striking techniques. A Korean art.

Judo - A sport derived from ju-jitsu. Involves throws and grappling.

Kung-fu - A Chinese art. The forerunner to many Japanese, Okinawan and Korean arts. Utilizes kicks, punches and strikes with an emphasis on circular and open handed techniques.

Is Martial Arts Training Dangerous?

While it is true that in any physical sport or discipline there always exists the possibility of an injury, a well run martial arts studio will have very few. This is especially true today with new and better safety equipment being developed on an ongoing basis. However, safety goes well beyond special equipment and here is where school policy and the instructors training and knowledge are vital.

In the grappling arts, where throws are utilized, it's critical that a student be proficient in their breakfalls (learning how to take a fall properly). This takes a fair amount of time (usually at least several months). Obviously a school must possess and utilize a quality set of mats for this type of training.

In the arts where sparring (practice or simulated fighting) is employed, it is imperative that the student be ready for this type of activity. Too many times, I have seen parents come into one of my studios looking to purchase sparring gear (head, hand and foot protective pads). After some discussion, I have found that their child is on lesson five or six (in another school or local "Y" program) and that the "Instructor" told them to go out and buy sparring equipment for the next class. How absurd! How can a child spar after such a short period of time? They don't know how to block (defend). They have not developed control of their kicks and punches. This is where choosing the right school is critical.

What about tournaments? While it is true that the possibility of an injury is greater in tournament competition, many tournaments are run each week without injuries. Here's where your instructor comes in. He/She should know which tournaments to enter and which to stay away from. The tournament directors, their

policies, rules and attitude determine the way the tournament is conducted and, therefore, the safety factor.

Martial Arts training, if conducted properly, is very safe. Over the years, we have seen many more of our students injured in outside activities (baseball, football, soccer, gymnastics, etc.) than at the studio.

How to choose a Martial Arts School.

"Not all martial arts schools are the same !"

Okay, you're starting to see how martial arts training can really give your child a head start in life. How do you go about finding the very best school for him/her? First, take your time. Don't run over to the closest or cheapest school in the area and sign him/her up. Instead, find out where all the schools are in your area. The easiest way to do this is to look in your phone book yellow pages (they are usually listed under "karate and other martial arts" or "martial arts instruction"). Make a list of the schools, their phone numbers and their approximate location within a 15 minute driving time of your home. You also might want to ask your child if any of their friends are involved and speak to their parents. This can also give you valuable information and insight that you can use later in your comparisons.

Now that you have a list of studios, call each of them. Ask if they have programs for your child's age group, the class schedule and their exact location (rule out any schools that might be too far or in a neighborhood that you would be uncomfortable going into). Make an appointment to visit each of the schools and to talk with the owner or head instructor (some schools have a program director). If possible request the appointment either 15 minutes before or directly after the class that your child would be in. In this way you can observe the actual class that your child would be participating in.

Now comes the most important part. Visit each of the schools at the appointed time. Be observant. Is the parking lot adequate and well lit? Is there a receptionist at the studio? If so, is she/he pleasant? (This is a person who you will be dealing with periodically.) Does the school seem organized and neat? Is it clean? Are there any unpleasant odors?

Speak to other parents who may be there. Ask each one how long their child has been attending and how they like the school and the instructors. Observe the class (If they will not let you observe, thank them and leave). While observing take note of the following:

- a) How well does the Instructor communicate with the class?
- b) Is the class exciting and fun or boring and dull?

c) Do the students display self discipline?

d) How many students are there on the floor? (A ratio of five to eight students per instructor/ assistant is ideal.)

e) Is the Instructor friendly or stern and militaristic?

Speak to the owner, head instructor or program director during your appointment. During the interview note his/her general attitude, communication skills and personal hygiene. Ask about the school's safety record and precautions. Ask about their sparring policy (if sparring is done in this art). Is there a written sparring policy? Do they require sparring gear (protective equipment)? How long do they attend class before they are allowed to spar?

Ask about their introductory programs (do they have one?). An introductory program is important because it lets the child try the martial arts and the school before committing to a longer program. Is the uniform included in the introductory course?

Check into the class schedule. How many times per week do they come? (Twice a week is usually about right) How long is each class? Children's classes should be somewhere between one-half hour to no longer than one hour. Longer classes often cause the child to lose interest. Find out if a missed class can be made up conveniently.

Speak to the instructor about the belt ranking system, if one is used. I feel a well graduated system of advancement is extremely important for motivation and self esteem. Ask about how long it will be between each promotion. Ask if children ever fail a test during the first six months to one year. I believe that an instructor should pre-test or evaluate a new student prior to test time. In this way a student that is not ready for testing can be told, rather than to be tested and fail! Obviously failing a test for a new student does nothing to promote high self esteem and self confidence.

Inquire about their policy and recommendations to having parents watch classes. Ask about the prices of various programs. Request information as to other fees and expenses such as special uniforms, sparring gear, association dues, testing fees and promotion fees.

What is their cancellation policy?

While all this might seem involved and time consuming, it really can be accomplished in a twenty or thirty minute visit to the school. Finding the right program for your child can really skyrocket their self esteem, self confidence and personal growth.

Finally, make a decision as to which school is best and one which will help

your child attain the goals you believe are most important.

What do lessons cost? Are there any other fees or expenses involved? What is a fair price? Should I make my decision based on price? Do I pay weekly, monthly or yearly? What about long term agreements? These and others are excellent questions to ask and consider.

I won't go into specific prices here due to the vast differences in various parts of the country. You should, however, find out the prices for each of the schools you visit. Use them as a guide, but not necessarily a major criteria for your choice. Finding the right school for your child is the number one priority. If the better organization costs a few dollars a month more, it's well worth it. I believe that two lessons per week is ideal for a beginner. If all you can afford is a one time per week course at the right school, you're better off than sending him/her twice per week at a poor one.

Ask about association or federation (martial arts governing bodies) dues or fees (usually \$10 to \$20 per year are common, however some are considerably more).

Find out whether the school charges for belt rank testing, many do. Some charge a minimal amount while others are quite high. If testing fees are required, find out the normal frequency of testing that you can expect. Also find out if there is a charge for promotion certificates and belts.

Is there an initial registration fee?

Ask about the various programs available, their duration and cost. Generally the longer the course, the less the cost per lesson.

How long is the recommended course of study ?

While for many of us martial arts training is a lifetime study, the average child in a well run program will participate for several years. In a poorly run school (ie: lack of motivation, militaristic attitude, boring or unplanned classes, too difficult or poorly graduated ranking system, etc., etc.) the average child may only stay for several months.

Many schools offer programs ranging from one month to several years in duration. Providing your child has attended an introductory session(s) I would recommend a course of 12 to 18 months initially. Having completed six months to one year of the initial program, you can now extend to a three or four year "Black Belt" program.

There are several reasons I do not recommend month to month programs. Let's start with the premise that the instructor has a strong belief in the martial arts. He/She knows how important it is for a child to reap the many character

building benefits a good martial arts program can give. He/She also knows that it takes time for each child to grow, learn and prosper from these benefits. Wouldn't it be a shame if we robbed the child of improved self esteem, self confidence, self discipline, poise and concentration by enrolling them in a short term course. The reason is simple: most new students will quit during the first year if their parents do not make a commitment for them to stay! Here's why.....

- a) The initial excitement and intrigue may wear off.
- b) The student may realize that the training is more difficult than they thought it would be.
- c) They may hit a "sticky point" or plateau in their belt grade that they believe they can't overcome.

But here is the key! Most children stay with the martial arts a long time (again, in a good program) if they get past the first year! This is why they need both the commitment and support of their parents and their instructor. I firmly believe that if an instructor really believes in the benefits of the martial arts, they will refuse to offer short term programs.

How important is motivation to long term study?

I think by now it's clear that an exciting, well planned, highly motivational program is essential.

One of the keys to keeping a child motivated is that they make consistent progress. Here's where a well organized, properly broken down belt ranking system can really shine. We sometimes forget that time seems to pass much more slowly to a child than to an adult. A child needs positive feedback, in the way of some type of promotion, at least every two or three months during the early stages of their training.

Discuss the promotion requirements and approximate time frame with the instructor. During your class observation take note of the class format. Is it interesting and fun or is it dull and repetitive?

Your child's level of motivation will contribute greatly to their overall length of study and, ultimately, their level of proficiency, self confidence and personal growth.

Should I Stay and Watch Class?

I think the real question is should you be able to watch the classes? Some schools just don't allow it! Others encourage it. What is best? I believe it is both important and desirable that you watch some or all of your child's class from time to time. I would have a problem with sending my child to a studio that did not

permit observation on some kind of regular basis. Having said this, I don't think it is wise to watch all the classes all or most of the time. Your goal should be to monitor your child's progress. The best way to accomplish this is to come into the studio at regular intervals and watch some or all of a particular class. I would also recommend coming to special events such as tournaments, promotions, demonstrations and parent's meetings.

What is the best age to start my child in the martial arts ?

The answer to this question really depends on the type of programs offered by the school. In general, a good starting age for traditional programs is at least six or seven years old. Don't worry, you haven't missed the boat if your child is older. Martial arts can benefit almost anyone from three years old to senior citizens.

Specialized programs for children three to five years old have proven to be especially beneficial. They can be an excellent way to introduce the martial arts to the little ones. One word of caution. Enrolling a three, four or five year old in a traditional training program will probably sour him/her to martial arts training more times than not. They will get bored and frustrated because they usually lack the concentration, balance and co-ordination required. Stick with the specialized programs for this age group. A good instructor will know very quickly if your child is ready and in which class they should participate.

Conclusion

Over the years, and literally hundreds of times, I have heard parents rave about the benefits of martial arts training for their children. How their concentration and school grades have improved. How their confidence has skyrocketed and their leadership ability in other activities has blossomed. How their hand-eye coordination, balance and poise have improved their other sports and athletic activities. That their self discipline has grown and doing their homework and chores are a routine, rather than an exercise in futility. The comments go on and on.

I have seen overweight children loose weight. Physically challenged children grow in co-ordination, balance and self confidence. Attention deficient children make incredible progress at home and in school. All in all, as one parent told me, " Martial arts training is the best thing I've ever done for my child."

If you have read this far, then you know more about why this is so and how to go about finding the very best school in your area than 99% of all parents. I hope this booklet will help you realize that martial arts training truly can " Give your child a head start in life. " I thank you for your attention and would appreciate your comments.