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Martial arts students are usually *less* likely to initiate a fight.



# The Martial-Arts Edge

Looking for a way to boost your child's self-esteem, improve his coordination, and emphasize manners and respect? This activity could be the answer.

BY LYNNE MEREDITH SCHREIBER

Parents watch from behind a plate-glass window as a half-dozen children in an advanced tae kwon do class at Malota's Martial Arts studio, in Birmingham, Michigan, focus on their instructor. "Huh!" they grunt as they kick to the side, hands stiff and high.

No bloody noses or broken bones here. Martial arts like karate, judo, and tae kwon do teach kids confidence, discipline, and strength. At the right

studio—where safety is paramount and parents are welcome to observe—kids learn to stand up for themselves and to protect others when they need to. They're also taught respect for adults and peers, and the importance of hard work and peaceful resolution.

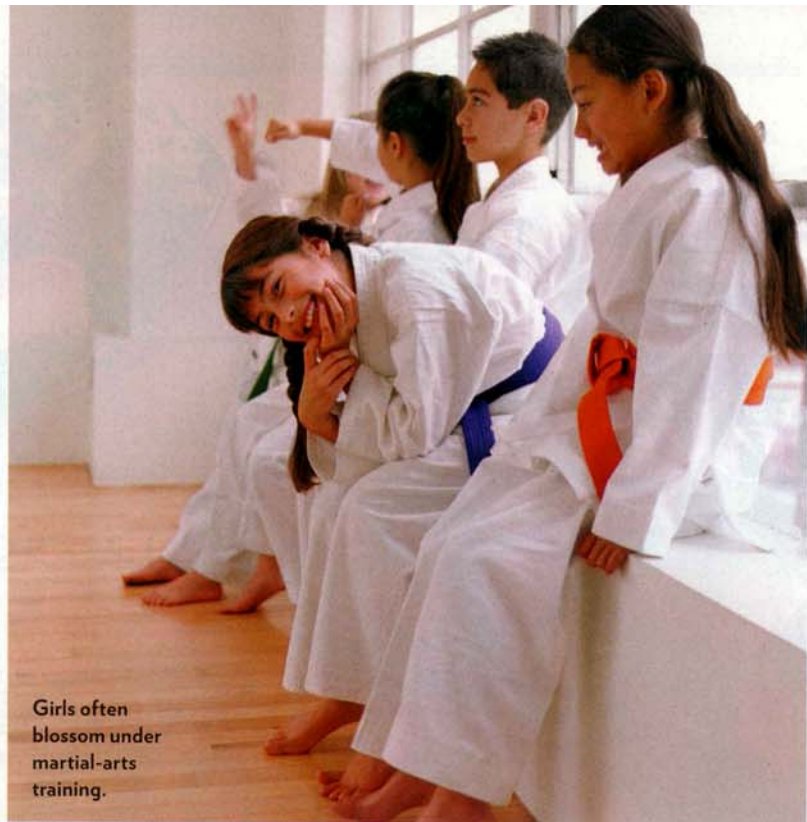
With schoolyard bullying occurring as early as preschool, parents are eager to boost their children's self-esteem and help empower them against aggressive classmates. That's why Deborah

Carpenter enrolled her son, Kevin, in martial arts when he was 5. He'd been shy and had a hard time sticking up for himself. "But once he got the hang of karate, he began to speak louder and walk taller," says Carpenter, of Tyngsborough, Massachusetts.

## All About Values

Martial arts is a general term referring to dozens of mind-body strength and fighting disciplines that got their start in East Asia. Today's classes for kids don't teach true martial arts. Instead, they're more of a sport that utilizes the traditional movements and emphasizes values. The physical benefits are impressive: "Martial arts teach flexibility, strength, quickness, and hand-eye coordination," says Peter Malota, owner of the Michigan studio.

Traditional martial arts are guided by a nonviolent, holistic approach to living. Instructors emphasize respect and the importance of being a good person. At Goshin Karate School and Judo Academy, in Scottsdale, Arizona, students are challenged to perform three acts of kindness every day. They even keep track online; so far more than 51,000 acts have been recorded. Manners are a big part of the curriculum too. "We teach 'home rules'—things like be respectful, be kind to your parents



Girls often blossom under martial-arts training.

and siblings, help around the house, make your bed, and don't interrupt adult conversations," explains Roger Boggs, Goshin's owner. Students must memorize those rules before they can advance to the next level.

## The Advantages for Both Boys and Girls

Children don't generally begin studying martial arts before age 6, though some schools will offer basic

classes for 3-year-olds. Four- and 5-year-olds usually start with a weekly tumbling type of class. After that, most martial-arts masters recommend attending class at least twice a week in order to advance to higher levels.

Parents are likely to enroll timid or quiet kids in martial arts to bolster their confidence. "My son's joy is just so infectious when he finishes a class, especially when his instructor, Sensei George Fusco, pats him on the back for a job well done," explains Ruth Logan, of Trumbull, Connecticut, whose 11-year-old, Brent, has been taking karate since he was 6. "Brent feels accomplished and invincible, and that feeling stays with him throughout the school week." Bonnie Daly, who lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, is equally enthusiastic about the benefits of martial arts. She enrolled her daughter, Andrea, in karate when she was 5. She'd already tried gymnastics, soccer, and tennis, but nothing was clicking for Andrea, who had been diagnosed with ADHD. "At first she acted

## The Most Popular Martial Arts for Kids

### JUDO

A Japanese martial art derived from jujitsu, it's best described as wrestling. The emphasis is on teaching light, deliberate kicks that help build strength and confidence.

### JUJITSU

It originated in Japan, though there's a Brazilian form as well. It combines judo and karate, and centers on punches, kicks, throws, and grappling.

### KENPO KARATE

Founded in China, kenpo focuses on punches, kicks, knee and elbow strikes, and open-handed techniques. It can be louder than other martial arts, because actions are accompanied by a verbal expression.

### TAE KWON DO

A Korean form of karate that's really big with children today, it incorporates slightly more kicking than punching and is known for its fast, high kicks.

### KUNG FU

A Chinese martial art built on the premise of staying low to the ground and blocking your opponent's kicks and punches deliberately and with power.

out and tested her limits in the class, but she finally understood that this wasn't playtime," Daly recalls. Meanwhile, Andrea still continued to misbehave in kindergarten. So Daly and the karate instructors devised a simple plan: They'd give Andrea a calendar and for every day that she behaved in school, she'd get a karate sticker. Soon, she was proudly bringing her sticker-filled calendar to karate. "Her instructors helped her in school, not just in the studio, and it also improved things for us at home. I can't sing enough praises for martial arts."

Andrea is now a black-belt karate instructor and hasn't taken her ADHD medication in five years. The high-schooler says she doesn't need it: "I can concentrate so much better in school. You really have to focus in karate, and it taught my brain how to do that." Indeed, in one study from Hofstra University, in Hempstead, New York, martial arts was found to help boys with ADHD with their academic performance; the boys also broke fewer classroom rules and left their seat fewer times.

## Inside the Dojo

At Malota's, a chart hangs in a window showing the different colors of belt levels. Children begin with white and work their way up to black by memorizing poses and practicing moves. Every few months, they take a test to determine whether they're ready to advance.

Kids don't start by fighting with another child. They kick and punch at a pad held by an instructor. They learn to take measured steps, to focus on a target, and to hit with strength and definition. Only when they've mastered those techniques do they spar against another child. Sparring involves kicks and punches and sometimes holding the other person, depending on the type of martial art being practiced. It may sound scary but it's carefully orchestrated: Children are well-protected by padding and they first face

opponents who are more skilled than they are, so they avoid serious harm.

## Picking a Program

Before signing your child up, observe a class. Is the atmosphere a positive one? Are the children not only learning, but having fun? If the answers are yes, ask for a trial class. Most schools offer this, and it's usually free.

You'll also want to talk to the owner or instructor. Ask how many kids have been hurt during class. Injuries in martial arts are rare, so the number should be zero or close to it. Find out the school's philosophy on mentoring and life skills too. Many studios will give academic-achievement awards or patches, and some even require community service, says Boggs.

If there's a drawback to martial arts, it may be the cost. It's higher than that of many sports because of the time commitment and level of oversight involved. A quality studio will assure that each teacher is a martial-arts master with a knack for working with kids. Plus, depending on the size of a school and its location, overhead costs can run a lot higher than, say, a soccer league that meets in an open field and is coached by parent volunteers. You can expect to pay at least \$100 each month for the classes, with extra expenses along the way for uniforms, belts, patches, and other equipment.

When you enroll your child, ask whether the studio offers a reduced rate for the first several weeks. "Most schools should have a discounted price in the beginning so that your child can decide whether he likes it," says Boggs.

Ultimately, it's the sport's all-inclusive nature that wins over both parents and children. "A child can be any gender or size, or even have special needs, and they're still taken seriously," says Logan. "I want Brent to feel good about himself, and studying this art builds him up. In the studio, he can show off what he's learned and get showered with praise and respect." □

*Additional reporting by Nikki Roberti*