The Benefits of Martial Arts for All Ages

By Doris Troxell

The martial arts have a long history. Having been practiced in Asian countries for hundreds, even thousands, of years, the martial arts have just begun to become popular in the United States in the last 50 years. Why the interest? Although the martial arts have originally been popularized through TV and film, millions have come to experience the many benefits of martial arts regardless of age. These benefits obtain for children as well as adults and senior citizens.

Children

The media today is having a negative impact on children and ignoring values like respect and self-discipline. “Just the thought of your angelic three-year old morphing into a designer-clad, smart-mouthed, money worshipping, me-obsessed, lay-about is enough to make any parent consider that threatening military school brochure,” writes John Phung, “but there is a solution out there to consider. Martial Arts training.”

Martial arts classes like tae kwon do, kung fu and judo are fun ways for kids to stay active and fit, but martial arts training is not what most kids see on TV or in the movies. Martial arts training are rooted in nonviolence. It has a wide variety of types and styles (mainly from Japan, China and Korea, but there are others as well), all of which are based on well-rounded, moral teachings. Martial arts, unlike other sports, teaches mental and emotional lessons along with the physical training. Phung continues: “Comparing [martial arts] to other kids’ activities and sports where fierce competitiveness and

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1 Phung, “Benefits of Martial Arts Training for Kids.”
‘winning at all costs’ seems to be the order of the day, it’s not surprising that many children grapple with issues of self-esteem and misplaced aggression.”

Unlike many sports where only the best kids play and the rest sit the bench, martial arts allows all students can participate and excel at their own pace. Martial arts can play an important role for kids who do not like or do well at other sports. This is explained well on the Homer Martial Arts webpage:

Martial Arts is unique in athletics, not just in being a “self defense” form, but because it is a Total Learning style activity. To get a better idea of what we mean by Total Learning activity, let's compare baseball for children and Martial Arts.

While baseball is known for developing competitiveness, most beginning programs must by necessity assume the new players already possess the basic physical skills for the game. The ability to run, throw a ball, and other simple, hand-eye coordination skills are taken for granted. Many children, however, are underdeveloped in these skills, which prevents them from really taking part in the game and they end up as “bench warmers.” Only the “naturals” end up receiving a full enjoyment of the sport.

Children learning Martial Arts begin by practicing the basic skills that are the foundation of the sport. These skills, which help build their coordination and balance, let the children become active in their sport as they progress, instead of just sitting on the bench. These fundamentals are the building blocks of all athletic skills and allow every child to progress, no matter what abilities he first brings to class.

The physical benefits for children are rather obvious and well known. These benefits would include improved balance, coordination, flexibility and overall fitness. Balance is improved through exercises and forms where children will learn to find their “center” which will keep them from falling over even while performing complicated or quick

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movements. By having to perform techniques with both sides of the body, coordination is taught through forms and sparring strengthens hand and eye movements and quickens reflexes. Flexibility is improved through stretching and kicking (especially the higher kicks found in Tae Kwon Do). Flexibility is something lost with aging, so beginning as a child and continuing will keep the muscles flexible and prevent injury. In his book, *Karate for Kids*, Robin Reilly points out that while practicing the martial arts one uses all the muscles in the body. When performing a kata all the muscles are used from the core, arms, shoulders and legs. Keeping kids physically active and fit is an important life long goal.

Learning self-defense can keep kids physically safe. Knowing how to escape a threatening situation or avoid conflict altogether is a practical life skill. Martial arts students learn awareness of themselves and their surroundings. Some, like Kent Fung, have a problem with telling kids they can defend themselves against an adult. It is a matter of size. However, proper technique and training can make size a non-issue. Fung would also take issue with teaching a child “to take on an adult” and to “maim and kill”. He would caution parents that kids will use what they have learned in class and some of the more aggressive and harmful techniques should be avoided (such at Muay Thai and Wing Chun). Fung prefers less “deadly” forms such as judo, jujitsu or wrestling. It would be better for a child to perform a throw down on the school bully than inflict a permanent injury. This is certainly something to consider when choosing a martial arts style or school.

The question of violence is a common concern among parents. Brad Binder sites several studies that have repeatedly shown that most students of martial arts are less

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4 Fung, “Children and the Martial Arts.”
violent. However, it should be noted that the research also shows that in order to lessen violent behaviors the students need to be trained in traditional schools (employing the physical, mental and spiritual components) as opposed to more “modern” schools which emphasize fighting and competition. It appears to be the combination of mental and physical disciplines that result in reduced aggression.

In their article “The Application of Traditional Martial Arts Practice and Theory to the Treatment of Violent Adolescents,” Stewart Twemlow and Frank Sacco explore the use of a martial arts program with violent adolescents. They identify six needs that are satisfied by gang membership: affiliation to a group, power, physical security, activities, role models, and sparring. Applied properly, their research shows that martial arts training can also fulfill these needs.

Twemlow and Sacco cite a 1989 study that suggests three key elements when working with violent youth. The first is the instructor who serves as a role model, and believes in the student. The second is the teaching of the school reflecting the ethics and philosophy of the martial arts in conjunction with the physical training. The third is the use of katas or forms which stress technique rather than conflict.

The longer a student stays in the program and advances through the belt ranks, Twemlow and Sacco argue, the more positive outlook, optimism and independence he/she will have along with a decrease in anxiety. Involvement also teaches students how to cope with stress in a non-violent manner. Martial arts training is able to this by building strong moral character and promoting non-violent behavior and attitudes.

In his essay “Should Kids Compete in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) Bouts?” Mike Adams contends that practicing Mixed Martial Arts is far less dangerous for children than

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5 Binder, “Psychosocial Benefits of the Martial Arts: Myth or Reality?”
sitting around playing video games. Unlike Mixed Martial Arts, writes Adams, video
games promote violence and inactivity. This inactivity, he claims, will eventually lead to
risks of obesity, cancer, heart disease, low self-esteem, behavioral disorders, and more.

Adams reiterates that studies show that children who participate in martial arts
training are less violent than those who don’t. Martial Arts student tend to be more
responsible and mature and less likely to be involved in any acts of violence. There is
greater risk in not exercising (putting kids at risk for disease) than training in a martial
art. Yes, the martial arts involve kicking and punching but the intention is never to harm,
says Adams:

I say that the stronger cause of violence in our society today is found in violent
TV programming and violent video games. Those powerful, violent images
(shootings, murders, war footage, etc.) are dangerous to the psyche of children,
and in most countries parents wouldn’t dare subject their children to the level of
violence we now consider routine on television and video games these days.6

Training in martial arts gets kids away from the TV and video games and gets them
exercising.

Perhaps the more overlooked benefits come from the mental, emotional and
sometimes spiritual components which make the martial arts unique from other sports
and activities. These include, but are not limited to: self-confidence, better focus and
concentration, self-control, respect for self and others, improved attitudes and behavior,
self-discipline, courtesy, reduced anxiety, patience, higher self-esteem, and conflict

6 Adams, “Why Mixed Martial Arts Training is Good for Children.”
resolution skills. Of these, self-confidence, discipline and respect stand out as the most beneficial.

Clint Leung argues in “The Benefits of Martial Arts Training” that self-confidence is especially important for those who lack confidence to begin with. “An increase in self-confidence for kids (as well as adults) will have a cross over effect in other areas of life such as in other sports and general self-esteem. Other challenges in life, both physical and mental, will be met with much less fear.”

Self-confidence is built through performing forms and learning self-defense.

Self-discipline is another benefit that will enhance the student’s life and carry over into other areas such as school and work. This benefit comes from the unique environment offered in martial art classes. The child’s self-discipline is built through the “repetition, details, rhythms, rules, and protocols that emphasized during class.”

Alison Hendrie adds, “The martial arts actually teach self-discipline and socialization skills. In fact, many parents whose children have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) report great success with these programs because self-control and concentration are exactly the skills underdeveloped in ADHD kids.” This observation is supported in the study by Eric K. Cooper, “Martial Arts Training for Children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.” His study measured inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity in ADHD children. Cooper reports that 75% of the participants noted improved behaviors which allowed them do better at school and at home.

Respect, again, is one of the values children are not being taught well these days. There is a lack of respect shown between children and parents, and students and teachers.

7 Leung, “The Benefits of Martial Arts Training.”
8 Elizabeth Nolan, “The Benefits of Martial Arts for Kids”
9 Hendrie, “Karate Kids: The Benefits of Martial Arts”
and even among peer groups. This can lead to disruptive behavior issues. Much of this is reinforced through the media which promotes an “it’s all about me” attitude. However, when a student enters the dojo, or school, respect is expected. These formalities of addressing the instructor properly, bowing, listening, standing still, and not using martial arts to harm others cultivate a respect for others and self. Joyce Roberson, a martial arts expert and author of the “Karate for Kids” column says, “Students learn that respect for others, as a priority, naturally leads to a respect for self. This wonderful philosophy is often at odds to what our young people learn here in the United States. We have become obsessed with the 'me first' mentality which often leads to emotionally unhealthy young people.”

“Karate, more than any other sport, is a life-long process,” says Roberson. “When kids click with this sport, it will follow them into adulthood. It can become a way of life, as these kids continually challenge themselves.”

Adults and Senior Citizens

The physical benefits for adults of all ages are very much the same as for children. Adults will gain cardiovascular fitness, strength building, flexibility, balance and coordination. As pointed out in his essay, “Why Martial Arts for Seniors?”, Ted Truscott states that the martial arts help reverse and slow the effects of aging. According to the Dalhousie University those past 30 will begin to lose muscle mass and strength, develop brittle bones and tighter joints. Exercise is a must to counter these body changes. People in their 40’s and 50’s who do not exercise will in essence double the effect of these

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10Carma Haley, “Karate Kids: Children and Martial Arts”
negative changes. Therefore, it is imperative that those over 30 continue to exercise and lead an active lifestyle.\textsuperscript{11}

There are, however, other health benefits as well that may not be as noticeable. Adam Swiercz notes in his article “The Physical and Psychological Benefits of Martial Arts Training” notes a study published in \textit{The American Journal of Chinese Medicine} on the practice of Qigong. The result of this study showed that practicing Qigong is effective in lowering blood pressure in those suffering from mild hypertension. The subjects also had a 20% average increase in their oxygen uptake which improves overall health.

Neuroscientist Wantuir Jacini conducted a study in which he compared the brain scans of judo experts, marathon runners, and nonactive subjects. It is known in the field of neurology that running greatly increases the brain’s ability to form new connections in response to a stimulus (also called “plasticity”). Jacini wanted to know how a more complex exercise would affect the brain. The results showed that the judo participants had a significant amount more gray matter. “The principle is that the practice of judo stimulates certain areas of the brain that are responsible for concentration, working memory, and motor movements, says Jacini. In these areas we have more connections, and that’s good because the cells become more efficient.”\textsuperscript{12}

Tai Chi is a well known martial art practiced by elderly people all over Asia. These people have better aerobic conditioning, balance, strength, flexibility and coordination than the average American in their 30’s (who are already suffering chronic diseases, obesity and cancer. These problems are not nearly as common in those who practice Tai Chi.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Truscott, “Why Martial Arts for Seniors”
\textsuperscript{12} Eric Hagerman, “A Legacy of Strength”
\textsuperscript{13} Mike Adams, “Martial Arts Offers Extraordinary Fitness and Health Benefits to People in Their 40’s and 50’s”
For the elderly, studies show that practicing “soft” martial arts like Tai Chi or “hard” martial arts like Tae Kwon Do are both beneficial. Sweircz also discusses these benefits in his article. He sites a study done by Hong and Chan that concludes “Tai Chi exercise is beneficial to cardio respiratory function, immune capacity, mental control, flexibility, and balance control.” Tai Chi has been proven to increase strength, endurance, flexibility, and prevent osteoporosis (all of which help prevent falls). Falls are reported to be the number one cause of accidental death of the elderly. Another interesting study shows how Tai Chi boosts the immune system. Sweircz sites a study done at the U.C.L.A Neuropsychiatric Institute which showed that that the elderly who practiced Tai Chi had an average of 50% increase of immunity to shingles.14

Along with the aforementioned physical benefits there are psychological benefits as well. Many these have already been mentioned in discussing the positive effects for children: self-confidence, better focus and concentration, self-control, respect for self and others, improved attitudes and behavior, self-discipline, courtesy, reduced anxiety, patience, higher self-esteem, and conflict resolution skills. To this list can be added stress reduction, the ability to relax, and a more positive outlook on life.

Practicing the martial arts can also relieve stress as noted by Clint Leung. Martial Arts are different from other physical activities due to the mental and spiritual elements helping to focus the mind and emotions and bring self-control and inner peace. Leung says, “In today’s hectic world, these particular benefits translate into one of the most effective stress management tool available. When training in a session or in a group class,
all the day to day trouble of the world seem to be forgotten. People come out refreshed, energized and ready to tackle the big world out there.”

Martial arts bring about a decrease in hostility, aggression, anger, anxiety, neuroticism and feeling vulnerable to attack while at the same time leading to more easygoing and warmhearted individuals, increasing self-esteem, self-control and self-confidence. It should be noted that the longer a person has practiced the martial arts the greater the changes.

Numerous studies over the past three decades have shown that martial arts have long term positive benefits for all ages. Whatever style of martial arts is chosen, it will have long-term physical and physiological benefits being good for the body and mind.

Works Cited

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16 Binder


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