



PHOTO BY CHUCK GIANGRECO, WESTCHESTER MARTIAL ARTS ACADEMY

Embracing the MARTIAL ARTS

How Your Child Can Benefit

By Colette Connolly

Maybe your child has seen a Bruce Lee movie, complete with spin kicks, flying leaps and hand-to-hand combat skills. Exciting, perhaps, but is this something your 5-year-old should engage in? Absolutely, say the experts, who agree that the martial arts offer a combination of physical fitness, self-defense, discipline and a way of life that sets it apart from all other sports.

What are the martial arts? Many parents may be confused, and rightly so, since there are several types available. Kung fu, Judo, Jujitsu and Taekwondo are familiar terms to most, but choosing the appropriate type for your child can be a daunting process.

To add to the confusion, the martial arts are often referred to as “karate,” a catch phrase that gained popularity because it was the first form of martial arts to be marketed in many parts of the world. Knowing the difference between a karate chop, a side snap kick or a guarding stance is not as important, say local instructors, as knowing the various types of martial arts available and determining what’s right for your child.

What’s the Difference?

Most martial arts incorporate a series of complex training regimens that aim to simultaneously develop strength, coordination and flexibility. The most common ones include Karate, Jujitsu, Aikido and Judo, which originated in Japan; Kung fu, a Chinese form of martial arts; and Taekwondo, a full medal Olympic sport that comes from Korea.

Other martial arts styles from Africa, Brazil and Vietnam

are commonly taught in the U.S., in addition to the American form of martial arts, which is a combination of Judo, Jujitsu, Kung fu and others.

Martial artists agree that all of the systems have one thing in common: to promote the basic science of self-defense. However, there are some differences. Some styles, such as Kung fu, emphasize grappling (the gripping, handling and controlling of an opponent without the use of striking), while others like Taekwondo focus on sophisticated kicking techniques, such as spinning, jumping and double round kicks.

Other styles involve jumping and acrobatic movements, as in Capoeira, a Brazilian martial art, and others, like the Japanese martial art Aikido, require graceful, circular movements. Because Aikido is decidedly Asian in origin, there is a great deal of emphasis on respect for one another and on creating mature, self-controlled students who can use their abilities responsibly.

Choosing the Right Level of Instruction

Finding a talented teacher and the proper age-specific martial arts curriculum for your child is important. Regardless of the style that is being taught, many schools in the region offer a variety of high-quality training programs that gradually introduce children to the world of martial arts.

At the Westchester Martial Arts Academy in Eastchester, owners Chuck and Kara Giangreco offer three different programs for children. They include the Little Dragons Program for 3- to 5-year-olds, the Juniors Program for chil-

dren ages 7 to 11, and the Black Belt Club for children also ages 7 to 11, who have attained a green belt or above. This two-year program is for students who are committed to acquiring a black belt.

“An age-specific program enables all of our students to develop at their own rate,” says Kara Giangreco, “since it’s important that they are not being held back by younger students or being overly challenged by older ones.”

The Giangrecos’ Little Dragons Program focuses on developing large and gross motor skills, in addition to behavioral and character development. The Juniors program for 5- to 7-year-olds works on honing teamwork, control, balance, self-discipline and coordination.

Allowing children to develop at their own rate is also the philosophy of Bruce and Susan Chung, the proprietors of Bruce Chung’s Tae Kwon Do in Harrison. Their Taekwondo program for 3-year-olds incorporates positive reinforcement in an environment that is not overly structured. “While it’s important that children learn to stay on task, there is still a lot of time for play and fun at this stage,” says Susan Chung, who holds a fifth degree certification in the Korean Chung Do Kwan Association. Her husband has a seventh degree certification.

The Chungs also offer Taekwondo classes for children ages 4 through 15, in addition to the Gym-Mini-Kick-It® Mommy and Me program for children ages 14 to 24 months and the “Lil’ Hoppers Me Only” program for toddlers ages 30 to 36 months.

The Benefits

If you are under the impression that the martial arts will make your child more aggressive, you’re mistaken, say the Chungs. “A child who has the discipline to participate in a weekly Taekwondo program is usually not the bullying type,” says Susan Chung. Like many other sports, the martial arts are a good outlet for the release of extra energy.

“The wonderful thing about the martial arts is that it offers a very good built-in philosophy for life,” says George Chaber, owner of Karate America in Bethel, Conn. Chaber teaches a form of martial arts known as Kosho Ryu Kempo, a style that incorporates the elements of Karate, Jujitsu, Aikijujitsu and Kobojutsu.

Other benefits include increased physical fitness, acquiring proper self-defense tactics, enhanced self-confidence and the opportunity to become involved in a productive after-school activity.

Interestingly enough, parents often turn to the martial arts when their children are acting out in school or at home. Believing that all problems are fixable, the Giangrecos use a “three-pronged approach,” emphasizing proper training techniques, constructive discipline and goal-setting strategies.

Those types of strategies work well on children with Attention Deficit Disorder and other behavioral issues, says Sean Alvarez of Gracie Barra of Westchester, a martial arts academy that teaches Brazilian Jujitsu. The physical and men-

tal multitasking that is required in the martial arts helps such children stay on task, says Alvarez, in addition to building their resilience and character.

The idea of teaching self-defensive tactics to older students, particularly girls, is becoming more popular, says Susan Chung, who sees an increase in the numbers of 9- through 12-year-old girls at her school. “Parents are getting smarter about this,” says Chung, and rightly so. Chung is anxious for her 8-year-old daughter to learn the skills that may be useful to her later on in life. “For younger kids, it’s all about fitness, flexibility, strength and focus, but as children get older, parents need to start thinking about how well their children can defend themselves.”



Are the Martial Arts Competitive?

Local instructors insist the sport is a non-competitive one, although all martial arts schools award colored belts to acknowledge proficiency, from the universal white belt for beginners to the coveted black belt of the expert. This is usually achieved through a process of testing, which takes place every few months.

“Kids like receiving belts and stripes based upon their performance, but I think it’s the wonderful feeling they get from every class that keeps them coming back,” says Peter Tirelli, master instructor at Tiger Schulmann’s Mixed Martial Arts in Yonkers.

The school teaches a mixed martial arts system that combines the techniques and concepts of three disciplines, including traditional Karate, modern kickboxing and the submission and grappling techniques used in Jujitsu.

Unlike competitive team sports, which require students to attend try-outs or travel frequently for games, the martial arts lets children advance at their own pace with personalized



instruction, says Tirelli. “Many kids are burned out with team sports,” adds Chaber, “and are looking for something that gives them a sense of structure and belonging.”

To reinforce the non-competitive aspect of the martial arts, Chaber requires his students to perform community service projects before graduation. In the past, they have worked at soup kitchens, visited hospices and volunteered at animal shelters. Like many other martial arts schools, students at Karate America are also required to maintain proper grades at school, turn in performance sheets and keep a positive behavior calendar related to the good deeds they perform at home.

The Giangreco's see the testing process and the acquisition of belts and stripes as an internal form of goal setting. “Simply coming to class and wanting to get to the next level becomes self-motivating,” says Chuck Giangreco. “The com-

petition itself is a great test of one’s abilities, not something to be disappointed about if you don’t do well.”

Excelling in the Martial Arts

While the martial arts may not be for everyone, Alvarez says “any kid can shine” if he or she is willing to work hard and make the commitment that is required for the sport. Parental involvement is also important to a child’s success, and that means encouraging the child to stick to it, even when they’re ready to give up, says Chaber, who’s been teaching for 16 years. “If you have the instructor, the child and the parent involved in the child’s life as much as possible, and they’re on the same page, then the sky’s the limit as to what you can achieve.”

The most successful students, however, see the martial arts as a lifelong journey, one that can positively influence their lives. “To be good at anything means you have to put the time and effort into it,” says Chuck

Giangreco. Wanting to give up is not unusual, says Kara Giangreco, who was named the 2003 Woman of the Year in Filipino Arts. “Everyone wants to quit at some point,” she says. “In fact, if you don’t hit that plateau, you’re not training hard enough.”

Finding a Good School

The martial arts can be appropriate for any child, say the experts, provided you are comfortable with the type of physical activity and philosophy involved, the teacher’s style and demeanor, and the facility itself. Visiting different types of schools and observing a couple of classes will help make up your mind, says Jose Marti of Traditional Karate in Bedford. Parents, he says, should ask the following questions.

- Are the instructors certified and qualified, and more importantly, are they patient, enthusiastic and caring individuals?

- Is the school a state-of-the-art, clean and spacious facility?
- Is there a place where parents can view classes?
- Does the school have a proven track record of success?
- Are the instructors professionals?

“The determining factor is this: how dedicated is the instructor to the success of his or her students,” says Marti, who teaches Shotokan Karate, a traditional Japanese martial art. What matters most, he says, is that students receive quality instruction in a safe environment.



Cautions, If Any

While most local instructors say martial arts are a safe sport, parents might want to familiarize themselves with the physical aspects of the training. Are warm-up exercises conducted before each class to adequately prepare children before training? Are water breaks encouraged? If someone is injured or not feeling well, should he or she be permitted to watch from the sidelines or must they work through it? If your child is involved in sparring, learn the safety rules of combat (that is, no hits to the head) and observe how they are enforced.

Most instructors feel privileged to pass along their martial

arts skills to children, and all of them agree that they chose the sport because they love it and they have a talent for it. “It’s very important to remember that our students are doing us a favor by showing up to our classes,” says Chaber. “Giving them quality instruction and having their best interests at heart are vital.”^a

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