

KARATE KIDS

for determined effort and natural self-discipline. After a 20-minute series of kicks, blocks and punches, young students hear the words "Drink break!" They dash to the fountain still full of laughing enthusiasm, always to the astonishment and enjoyment of the adults who watch. And they run back, ready to do more.

Rewards of the Martial Arts

Karate gives back what you put into it, and beyond. For children, who are in the process of growing and developing, the benefits can have far-reaching effects for years to come.

In a class of young white belts (ages 5-8), basics can be amorphous, with children wandering off between exercises to fool around. Instructors continually shape behavior toward the goal: disciplined, strong basics. The weeks pass, and the children begin enjoying the improvement they feel happening. They see new goals in sight, like yellow belt or a chance to compete, and this motivates some to try even harder. They become engrossed in perfecting a kick or punch. Most of all, they enjoy the act of throwing a kick or punch with everything they've got, just because it's fun. They eventually become capable of focusing their attention on a 20-minute set of basics.

The challenge of trying hard helps children and adults so they can have strength and concentration later, which is essential for achievement. The personality traits that give strength to a student's character, such as determination and persistence, can be developed in response to a challenge. The skillful instructor presents difficult situations in such a way that experiences of success and mastery become possible. He calls into question the limitations of his students, while encouraging and rewarding their efforts. These experiences build what psychologists call "self-esteem." Self-es-

When a child is very young and first learning to walk, just taking one small step seems difficult. Parents watch the child fall and lament "Will my child ever learn to walk?"

Yet, with each attempt, the infant is learning a great deal more than meets the eye. Both consciously and subconsciously he is mastering movement and balance, enhancing brain development. The child gets up and tries again repeatedly, driven from within. Finally, with a big grin on his face, he takes his first step.

The martial arts instructor is in a position to enhance and develop this inner drive to learn, grow, and orient within each and every child. He can guide and encourage this process, opening doors of possibility through the martial arts for all who enter.

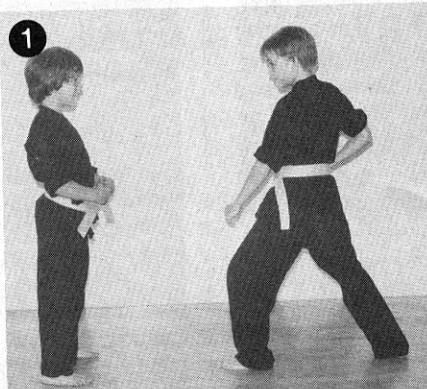
Karate is natural for children. It is the rare child who is not captivated by the martial arts. They are fascinated with the movements, the excitement, the vitality. Some identify with the symbolism of the invincible hero. And unlike adults who often have to set aside their dreams for practicalities, the child responds; he loves it, therefore he wants to do it.

Children have an enthusiasm which is unique to their young age. George Bernard Shaw saw this when he said "'Tis a pity that youth is wasted on the young." How can children channel that youthful exuberance into meaningful and rewarding efforts? Intensity, properly directed and developed, becomes the foundation

Martial Arts Opens Doors to Growth

by Alex Simpkins, Ph.D., and Annellen Simpkins, Ph.D.

Three-step sparring introduces children to the concept of block and counterattack. Here, two youngsters square off (1). One child throws (2) a right punch which is blocked by the defender, then follows with a left punch (3), also blocked by the defender. The attacker tries once more with a right punch (4), but the defender blocks it and counters (5) with a right reverse punch to the midsection.



Photos courtesy of Drs. Alex and Annellen Simpkins

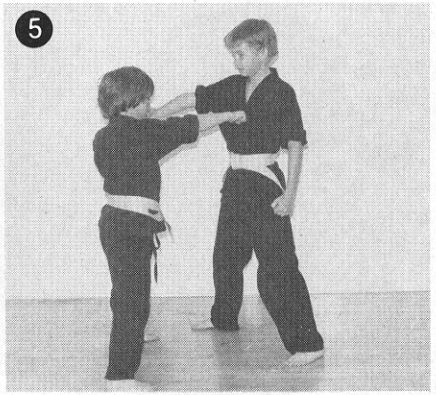
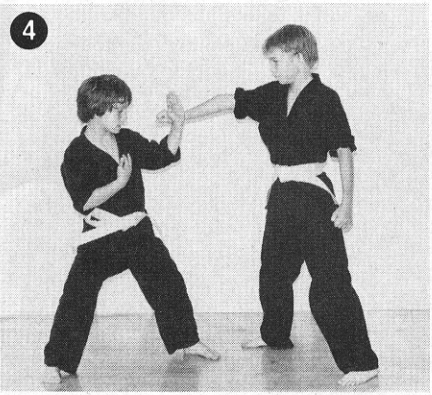
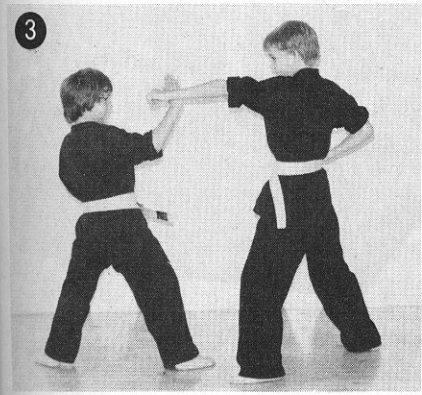


teem is the appraisal you have of yourself and your capacities. It can be positive or negative, accompanied by feelings of confidence or insecurity. Research indicates that people with low self-esteem accomplish less and are not as likely to be successful. Positive self-esteem can be built by experiences of success and mastery. Karate offers such experiences at every workout: the feeling when you throw that kick better or finally perfect a

kata (prearranged fighting form). During childhood, self-esteem is in its formative stages. Therefore, the mastery experiences a child gets from karate can help send him on a lifelong path of positive self-image and the belief that "yes, I can do difficult things if I try hard and give my best effort."

Once a child begins to feel that inner confidence, he will be able to put forth a wholehearted effort at workouts. Many in-

structors have seen the tremendous change which occurs when a student's attitude turns around. Suddenly the child is attentive and focused in what he does. He begins to put patterns together more easily. Coordination improves because the mind and body are working together, not in conflict. Attention and effort go into every move, making the results clear to all. Instructors correct movements, which leads to enhanced body awareness





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and control. These are prerequisites for improved coordination, which naturally evolves as the child progresses.

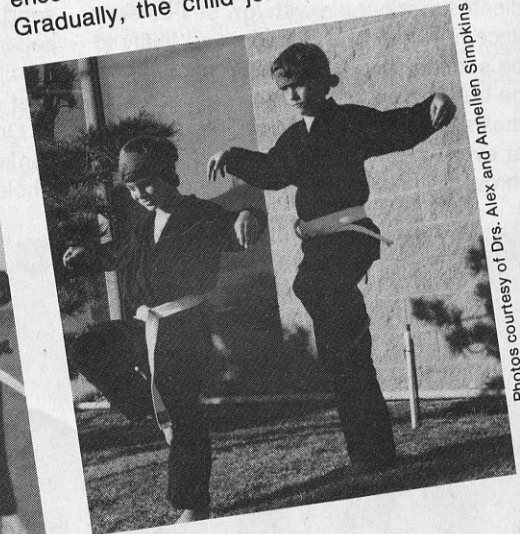
Teaching the Difficult Child

Children who have problems with aggression, discipline, concentration, or fear, sometimes join karate schools. Such children can be a challenge for the instructor since they are often disruptive to others and disobedient. How can the instructor deal with such children?

Clinical psychology distinguishes between the symptom and the problem. Just suppressing the symptom, while ignoring the underlying problem, will lead to frustration and even an increase of the negative behavior. An instructor can have a profound effect on a student if he looks beyond the symptom and is willing to be objective.

One child, for example, came to a class saying he was excited about learning karate. However, when he worked

out, he refused to do things with the group. He would try to stand ahead of or behind the others in basics and did his kata backward, with no effort to keep to the instructor's count. He would whine and try to be excused for long bathroom breaks. Yet all the while, he insisted he wanted to learn karate and could not help himself. The instructor could see that his attention span was short and concentration skills were lacking. He assessed that the child's self-confidence was so low he could not join in while he felt unskilled. Instead, he acted rebellious. After the instructor worked individually on the student's concentration, the child was able to focus his attention long enough to memorize the sequence for the first kata. He loved the feeling of mastery and repeated the form over and over. The instructor set fair but definite boundaries on his disobedience, while also giving him encouragement on small achievements. Gradually, the child joined in with the



Photos courtesy of Drs. Alex and Annellen Simpkins

For lower-belt students, sparring (below) should be controlled at a no-contact distance. This way, students can throw techniques with all their force, but without fear of injuring their opponent. Animal styles (below right) come naturally to children and help create enthusiasm in their training.



Martial arts training can build confidence and self-esteem in a child. Once a child feels that inner confidence, he will put forth a wholehearted effort in workouts.

Photo by Kenneth A. Nanni

class more and worked hard to achieve. He might not have done so had the instructor only punished him for rebelling.

Anyone who has seriously devoted himself to the martial arts knows that at certain points along the path, your greatest adversary is yourself. There comes a point where the limitations in your character hold you back. Some people's difficulties derive from a lack of commitment, while others may have problems controlling aggressive impulses, or they lack self-discipline.

In many schools, it is up to the student to get through his difficulties himself. With children, however, instructors must do more than just present the workout. Many children are still learning how to follow directions and fit in with a group. They need guidance in the mental, physical and spiritual aspects of the martial arts in order to develop to their potential.

The wise instructor addresses himself to the *situation* rather than the character or personality of the student. He can help with the character by not passing judgment on the student's behavior. Dignity and self-control displayed by the teacher can be powerful examples to his students. If he respects the ability and potential of his students, they may well surprise even themselves.

Legendary martial artist Mas Oyama perhaps states the essence of karate best: "Karate, a martial art employing no weapons, demands hard, severe training and consequently develops great physical strength. But this is not the sole aim, for karate is distinguished from many similar endeavors by the emphasis it places on spiritual and mental growth and maturity. As a trainee becomes stronger and more technically skillful, he develops self-confidence, which transforms his personal relations."

Learning Technique

No matter the martial art, it should develop the whole person: mind, body and spirit. The more well-rounded, the better.

Kata training teaches orientation in space, balance, force, focus, and precision. Reflexes are trained that eventually become subconscious. Some instructors use numbering as an aid to learning a form. On each counted number, the child must perform the appropriate movement of the form. Students begin by getting the general sense of the form. Gradually, the details are perfected until they are ready for advancement.

Children are "naturals" in animal styles. They can tumble and leap like the most agile monkey, or stalk and pounce



Photo courtesy of Columbia Pictures

like a ferocious tiger. Bringing out the best capabilities of a student is an art.

It is perhaps best to encourage the "flow" of the student rather than stress attention to detail, until readiness for that stage is reached. Otherwise, the instructor brings about the dilemma of the centipede (from Alan Watts' *The Way of Zen*):

*The centipede was happy, quite,
Until a toad in fun
Said, "Pray which leg goes after
which?"*

*This worked his mind to such a pitch
He lay distracted in a ditch
Considering how to run.*

Martial arts movies such as *The Karate Kid* generate interest in the arts and increase enrollment in martial arts schools. They also give youngsters role models to emulate.

Sparring

Sparring can be quite a threatening experience for some students at first. For others, the instructor must hold them back like he would a dog on a leash. Active, competitive children like to "mix it up" even before they know any technique. As they gain strength and ability, they need to learn self-control. The impulse to get into battles can be expressed in controlled, all-out effort in sparring. Passive or withdrawn children who tend to shy away from fighting learn to control their fear so they can enter a sparring match with enthusiastic effort.

Positive experiences in sparring can build strength, confidence, and self-es-

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Basics practice can be ragged at first, with students completely out of sync. Even so, children will usually show enthusiasm and effort.



Photos courtesy of Drs. Alex and Annellen Simpkins

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teem in a child. In one case, a child who was highly coordinated and loved sports and competition would hesitate or hang back just enough to put himself at a disadvantage when confronted directly in various sports. As he progressed in the martial arts, he learned to go all out with every move. He applied this in sparring and overcame his hesitance. His confidence carried over into other sports as he continued to progress in karate.

Children can be encouraged to learn to set aside fear or anger when sparring. They must approach the situation with courage and discipline. They can have a good time sparring, whether attacking or defending. Mastery of a variety of techniques leads to a repertoire of responses. As the student advances in training, he gains confidence and skill. By clearing his mind and bypassing the thought process he makes a direct response. This need not involve his limitations and fears.

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Here again, animal techniques can be used to effectively stimulate learning. Tiger techniques stimulate the strength and aggressiveness of the young martial artist. The ferocity and vitality of a fierce tiger enhances the child's courage. When he executes the technique, he is a tiger. Tiger techniques can build a strong foundation for the child's blocks and counters.

Crane elusiveness and footwork complement the size and strength children have. They find it natural to sway and step, duck and dodge.

Children's timing and coordination need attention, yet the instructor should not underestimate a child's capacities. It can be disconcerting, as well as ineffective, to attempt to force a child to express his talents during sparring.

Children have a natural enthusiasm which the martial arts can help them discover how to apply. In these circumstances, it becomes only natural for their talents to be expressed. ❧

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