

## Children in Taekwondo

In the United States, Taekwondo's most abundant patron is the child. Children flock to *dojangs* all across the West Coast every week, taking part in an art form that has roots in a place thousands of miles away dating back over two millennia ago. Day in and day out the American tiger cubs of Taekwondo are welding the historic martial art into the seams of American culture while glimpsing at a whole new world steeped in Eastern traditions, experiencing and expanding a cornerstone of Korean culture in the Western hemisphere. Learning Taekwondo at a young age can pay dividends well beyond the kicks and punches mastered, but this realization rarely dawns before young adulthood. Typically child students are focused on the current task at hand: learning the martial art.

If anything, one of the greatest noticeable achievements of the diffusion of Taekwondo in the United States has been the education of a physically active lifestyle. The very nature of Taekwondo is an aerobic and anaerobic workout coupled with highly difficult techniques that require flexibility and control of one's body. Starting active participation in martial arts early on offers benefits to the student, considering the relative ease with which children can increase flexibility over time and exponentially condition their bodies to reach an overall excellently balanced physicality that can be maintained throughout the teenage years. Maintenance is the key, and is found by instilling early on routines of keeping good health and well-being.

This conditioning can affect young students well into their adult life. Physical commitment to Taekwondo is hailed and rewarded, giving much reason for children to try and try again. Being overweight or physically awkward are merely hurdles to overcome on the road to black belt, the material motivation

that warms the engine of the internal motivation. The sheer intensity of Taekwondo pushes young students to get into shape.

And yet, being in shape to practice Taekwondo successfully cannot be modeled on one mannequin. No matter the body type, the martial art helps shape and mold the ideal body type to each individual: skinny, heavy, short, tall, weak, strong, all of these attributes can fit the Taekwondo body, if the student has the Taekwondo mind.

Young children are still learning about the world around them, eager to explore and find what's brand new to them. In such a crucial period of life, strong impressions can go on to last the child a lifetime. Another reason Taekwondo can be critically important to children is because of the impression it can leave in their minds. Building on basic foundational techniques to rise through the belt ranks can demonstrate the process of learning through long-term commitment. The very act of learning and listening can be honed under the seasoned eye of a good teacher. Essentially, the tenets of Taekwondo can become ingrained in the minds of the young.

And this should be the ultimate goal in training young students in Taekwondo. Courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, indomitable spirit. To the young cub, these words are too big to understand. They abstract the core of a good person, something they are still working out in their own minds. How are they to know what a good person is if they have not experienced the opposite? To that end, how are they to understand consistent kindness, honesty, the power of the will to go on, discipline, and an unbreakable spirit if they never experience the shame in the opposite?

Taekwondo can be a powerful art because it teaches one how to be a good person. Everyone has a temperament, some more strong-willed than others, but from the intense training in Taekwondo everyone reaches their moment of

shame and are lowered to their breakdown, whether through painful losses sparring, seemingly unbreakable boards that create doubt in one's mind, or through undisciplined behavior that provokes disappointment from the highly respected Master. But through all these mistakes, these low points, and with the guidance of a brilliant and patient teacher and role model, the tenets can be learned. But they are learned solely through one's self – no matter the greatness of a teacher, no person can ever make one understand the motivation to achieve the tenets. This is precisely why colored belts are used. Not only to distinguish rank, but to give motivation to be like those above them, to act and learn through observation and imitation.

The tenets of Taekwondo will not be fully understood by a child, but by grasping at them early and learning to act as those who have them do, a day will come when the full meanings will dawn on the child. And then the process will repeat. Children are extremely important to the future of Taekwondo and human society– the earlier they learn to respect each other and themselves, the better our world can be.

*Bret Chernoff*