

KIDS & Martial Arts

What parents are saying:

"Karate has given my son confidence and a sense of 'stick-to-it-iveness.' More than that, it has given him a sense of civic responsibility, community involvement and awareness of kindness to others."

Darbie Esther, Karate and Taekwondo Mom

It's hard to miss the message that martial arts training is good for kids and families. You see it on Sesame Street and your favorite social media space. Most of us know at least one family who considers a nearby dojo their second home. More than one study has linked qualified martial arts instruction to better focus, fitness and future success.

Still, while the benefits are clear, those benefits are not guaranteed for all people or from all types of instruction. They come from a combination of three elements: training with the right person or program, for the right reason, and in the right environment.

Finding that combination for your child or your family takes some research. We asked the owners of three high-quality local martial arts schools for their advice on how to find that perfect combination.

« The right program »

Once upon a time, any given community might have had just one or two martial arts academies that accepted children. Today, there's one in almost every strip mall. That means parents face the challenge of choosing between many different options.

"Martial arts training can be a huge influence on your child's life," says Sylvia Smart from the Tulen Center in southwest Portland. "They are going to soak up all sorts of things from the environment, culture of the school, style of art and teachers. Take the time you need to make sure these messages mesh with your own values. Don't base your decisions only on pricing or speed of rank attainment."

Smart and our two other experts – Dan Sikkens of the nonprofit Aim High Academy of Martial Arts in Beaverton, and Stefan Melin of Bee Martial Arts in Milwaukie – gave almost identical answers when asked how parents should shop for a martial arts program. Their advice is:

Visit multiple schools. Most programs offer an introductory course where you can train for a week or two at low cost with no commitment. Take advantage of this deal at several schools to find the best match for your family.

Talk to other parents watching a class. Ask what their children have learned, what they appreciate most, and what they would change about the program if they could.

Pay attention to how children are treated. If the instructors bully students on the mat, or if they rush past a child to talk to the parent about money, that's a sign to look elsewhere.

Don't focus too heavily on price. As long as you can afford lessons, the benefits of the right program outweigh a \$20 or even \$50 monthly difference in tuition.

By Jason Brick, As seen in MetroParent, April 2014



Do worry about convenience. If the school is more than a 30 minute one-way trip, or the schedule doesn't match your family's needs, it doesn't matter how great the program is. You'll start finding excuses to miss class.

Be wary of long-term contracts. During the 1990s, some martial arts schools started imitating health clubs and insisting on year-long or longer contracts for beginning students. Though a longer commitment is common for experienced students, a required contract at the beginning of your membership is a warning sign.

Avoid schools that promise a black belt for a set price or in an unreasonably short period of time. Similarly, watch out for schools that have full black belts under the age of 10. Both can indicate a school that's more about selling programs than realistic expectations and quality instruction.

Always trust your gut. If you get a bad feeling about a school, go somewhere that gives you a good feeling.

« The right reason »

There isn't a single "right reason" to start your child or family on a course of martial arts training, but some expectations are more reasonable than others. Further, as Sikkens points out, some of the best reasons to join a martial arts academy come as a surprise to most students.

Fitness: "Pediatricians now recommend at least an hour of exercise each day," says Smart. "Not all kids respond well to organized team sports, and some love those sports but are looking for particular skills. Martial arts training provides that exercise along with important life skills."

A typical martial arts class includes calisthenics, active practice of vigorous moves and energetic games. Even better, most instructors provide a visible example of benefits that come from living a healthful lifestyle and encourage students to do the same.

Self Defense: No martial arts class will teach your 6-year-old how to defeat an adult attacker, but the basic defense skills taught in class can give her the confidence to keep a bully away. Plus, the awareness and falling skills that come with most training are proven to reduce injuries.

Some parents are concerned that martial arts training will encourage a child to fight, but Melin cites a 2008 study published in *Psychology in the Schools* that found martial arts reduced aggression in boys and increased a student's likelihood to intervene when witnessing another child being bullied.

Life Skills: Many parents are surprised by "the amount of knowledge gained that has nothing to do with kicking or punching," says Sikkens.

Almost every martial arts studio includes instruction on respect, personal discipline and the setting and achieving of goals, and the best programs for children incorporate those skills into the curriculum. Aim High's black belt program includes a rigorous set of citizenship assignments students complete at home and at school that teaches leadership, problem solving and the importance of maintaining healthy relationships with the people around you. Smart adds that the rank system of belts in martial arts provides a motivator for students who might not be moved by less concrete and immediate concepts.

Community: This benefit comes as a surprise to many families who are new to martial arts, but it's consistently reported as the most valued by experienced students. In a time when communities and neighborhoods are more divided than ever, says Sikkens, a martial arts studio is a place where people with shared values gather to participate in something that's important to them. This support network includes the students training on the mat and the parents watching together from the stands.

« The right environment »

There's a lot of controversy over which style is better – or worse – but the experts we spoke with agree there's no such thing as an objectively superior style of martial arts. There are better matches between styles and individuals' skills and goals, and there are absolutely better and worse teachers, but the benefits of martial arts aren't limited to any one form.

This is especially true of children's programs, as the basic concepts taught in those classes are virtually identical from style to style. They might have different names and be taught in different ways, but the body mechanics and concepts remain the same. In this area, in part because we are fortunate to have such a rich Pacific Rim influence, a wide variety of martial arts styles are available for children. And while it's true that no one art is better or worse than another, some can be better for kids and families.

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The styles of martial arts available locally can be divided into three general categories:

Kid-Friendly Arts: Styles in this category avoid the use of realistic weapons and incorporate moves kids find especially fun and interesting. In America, many of these arts focus on children's programs as a major part of their business. These aren't always the best schools – some are notoriously guilty of the young black belt problem – but they can be better bets.
Examples: Taekwondo, Capoeira, Wrestling, Poekolan

Kid-Neutral Arts: Most traditional martial arts fall into this category. They have neither elements that make them especially good for children nor elements that make them less appropriate. In most cases, what makes one of these programs better or worse for kids is the attitude of the instructor.
Examples: Karate, Kenpo, Jiu-Jitsu, Kung-Fu

Kid-Careful Arts: To be clear, these arts aren't bad for kids. However, they include the application of deadly weapons, center on concepts that might confuse or bore young martial artists, and often emphasize competition to a degree most children find too intense. Take an extra-close look at how these arts are taught in any program you're considering.
Examples: Aikido, Mixed Martial Arts/UFC, Escrima, Krav Maga, Muay Thai

These categories are by no means absolute. It's common for an Aikido school to have an excellent kid's program while the Taekwondo program down the block doesn't work with children at all. Not every mixed martial arts gym is full of sweating, swearing 20-somethings training for the octagon. Your best bet is to use these suggestions as a tie-breaker between two programs of similar quality rather than the sole basis for your decision.

Your kids might try karate for a few weeks, then move on to soccer or piano or lego robotics. Your whole family might join a martial arts academy and train for years until you all have high-level black belts and a school of your own. You won't know until you try, and you won't really have tried until you've experienced the right program for the right reasons in the right environment.



In addition to learning physical skills, martial arts students develop important life skills such as compassion, patience, respect and leadership