

Children in Martial Arts: the Cost

The following article is excerpted from the wonderful book, "Games Children Play" (Hawthorne Press). It is provided here by the kind permission of its author, Kim John Payne, whose website - <http://www.thechildtoday.com> - is a resource for parents and teachers.

The number of children taking part in martial arts is rapidly growing. All around the world, armies of baggy, whiteclad children are being dropped off at local recreation centres, to be picked up an hour or two later. Parents are unwittingly helping to prime emotional time-bombs which will explode in adolescence with shock waves that last for many years.



Martial arts have their origins in ancient times. They were developed out of deep esoteric and religious prac-

tices, involving rigorous and repetitive meditation, spiritual instruction, self-denial, and strict diets. All of this was overseen by masters, often monks who had devoted their entire existence to a spiritual path. These mystery centres were often cut off from large population areas, in monastery-type situations. However, there were three crucial aspects to such training. Firstly the students were seeking self-development through esoteric, spiritual disciplines. Secondly their aim was to understand the subtle energy flowing within the body, and its relationship to the spiritual dimension. Thirdly, they were young adults.

Contrast this with what is happening today. Children are exposed to an increasing level of explicit violence, particularly communicated by music and the media. The nuclear family and community structures continue to break down. Children feel unsafe. Parents not only fear for their children's safety, they often feel unable to supply the necessary security and structure in which to raise their children. The son or daughter comes home from school saying that a number of kids in the class are doing martial arts and that it seems 'really cool'. The child seems enthusiastic, whereas

so many other things seem to be 'boring'. The parents feel it must be better than hanging around or playing computer games, so they agree to the child taking part. They feel, perhaps, that such training will be really helpful.

But let's look more closely at what is going on in modern martial arts. Martial arts, or as it is often called now, self-defence, has largely cut itself off from its cultural and spiritual dimensions, from its source of inspiration and purpose. While lip-service may be paid to this, it is seldom more than an impoverished shadow of what existed in the past. Martial art becomes a hobby, a method to keep fit, or a sport. But at the same time it focuses on the maiming of another human being. No longer does the exponent need to go through all the hardships that would both challenge and prepare him to use this knowledge and power wisely. Martial arts have been adapted to our modern consumer consciousness, our need for instant gratification. And though we buy now, we will certainly, if unknowingly, have to pay later.

There is evidence that in the past, in some martial arts schools, students were taken in at about the age of puberty. In other schools the students would not be admitted until after their teens. What is clear is that in both cases students were not given the overt martial art forms or exercises until they had reached maturity in their late teens or early twenties. There was a very special reason for this. The masters had to wait for the moment when the 'ego' appeared - the time when the adolescent became an adult. It was only then that the young adult had the faculties and the ability to understand and control the special energy and power that he was subsequently taught to develop.

Equipping children with these powers before they have the maturity to deal with them, is perhaps the most dangerous aspect of modern martial arts.

I once broke up a street fight where a young boy of eleven was very seriously assaulting a much older and larger boy. The younger boy was extremely difficult to restrain from further violence as he was badly out of control. The older boy suffered a broken jaw and nose as well as serious knee injuries. Later when I talked to the younger boy he told me he had been studying martial arts for four years. In the last year, which had been quite

intense, he had gone in for competitions and done well. I asked him what had happened in this instance. He told me the older boy had been picking on one of his friends and that his friends had asked him to 'sort the guy out'. He agreed; however, in the fight, he said he 'lost it', meaning he had lost all control. He became quite upset, saying that he was really sorry, and that when he had approached the other boy he hadn't meant to hurt him so badly. In subsequent conversations with the boy it became clear that he had become withdrawn and even a little afraid, though he had become a hero of sorts amongst his friends. I was puzzled as to why he should feel reticent. His answer was that he was afraid to get angry now in case it happened again. He told me that at the time of the fight he had meant, and had had the ability, to kill the older boy.

This is an extreme example of what can happen if children are given powers they cannot control. Also, in this case and in other less dramatic ones, children studying martial arts gain a good deal of kudos from their classmates. They are seen as hard or bad figures to be handled with care. Even if the child is actually not very proficient at the skill, he will still develop an aggressive stance toward problems, and the others in the group will pick this up. Gaining status in a group through an undercurrent threat of violence is not a quality that anyone would wish for a child or a group of children. The other effect it may have is to goad other, bigger children into picking on the martial arts student in order to 'put him in his place'; they may even do this in a gang. The exponent often has an over-inflated impression of his own abilities and can be seriously at risk in these situations. The parents who sign their children up for classes in the hope they will learn how to protect themselves, are contributing to a no-win situation. Children may get themselves into trouble by overestimating their ability. It takes years of intense practice to reach the stage of being able to defend oneself properly. But if this stage is reached, then a scenario like the fight I have described may develop.

But there is another aspect. Throughout this book it has been suggested that games, sports and movement play a key role in both the physical and inner growth of the child. Movement in general has a critical task in shaping social and emotional development. Let's look, therefore, at the movements involved in martial arts, and their possible ramifications:

Firstly, consider the body position. The knees are bent, the centre of gravity is dropped. This, like all the movements involved, is continually practised and repeated. Weight and gravity are strongly cultivated. But as I have tried to show throughout this book, it is very important for

children to receive a balanced spatial education. Martial arts takes little account of the five other directions in space that need equal cultivation at specific times in the child's life. In martial arts, the aspects of 'levity' * (as opposed to gravity), back-space, front-space, left and right, are either contracted or misused. In more simple terms, the martial art stance is not a natural way for children to stand. It counteracts the healthy experiences they need - of running, jumping, skipping, and all the activities that are involved in levity. An experience of gravity alone, of being 'brought down' without any counterbalance, is not at all helpful for children's development at this age.

In many martial art forms, particularly in what are known as 'hard' forms, the hands and feet are used like heavy clubs ready to hit or kick, or like sharp knives prepared to chop or hack. Needless to say this is not what these finely developed parts of our bodies are designed to do, and repetitive use of the feet and hands in this way does little to cultivate sensitivity or 'gentle handling' of a situation. The voice, our most expressive tool, is used in martial arts as a guttural roar.

All these martial movements have a decided emotional as well as physical impact on the student. For example, in some martial arts it is considered highly praiseworthy to be able to punch, kick or even head-butt through an extremely hard tile held vertically by two helpers. The thicker and stronger the tile, the higher the level reached. Any normal, untrained person attempting to emulate this would be badly hurt. It is done by focusing an intense energy far beyond the obstacle - which becomes a mere trifle to be destroyed in the movement aimed beyond it. This consciousness is cultivated through repeated practice. To allow a physical barrier to interfere with your movement towards a goal, is considered a weakness. But this has significant implications in terms of human relationship for the child or adolescent who does not yet have the faculties to control such a power. Take for example a situation where he is told that homework must be done by a certain date, or that he must be home at a certain time at night. If it is his aim not to be in at that time, and he has had it deeply ingrained into his psyche that he should ignore, or punch through obstacles in order to reach his goal, his reaction to parental constraints will be strongly affected. This is not intellectual theory - it has been observed by many educators and parents alike.

A similar outcome is also to be found in the deflective techniques used in many soft-form martial arts. In this case the exponent will deflect and direct the force that he receives back on to and therefore against, the source. This can be devastatingly destructive, depending on the amount

of energy directed. But the emotional impact of this technique is also considerable. If, for example, parents ask their son to return home at a certain time, and he disagrees, he may well simply deflect the parents' energy - in this case their instructions - and be home at what ever time he wishes. If this causes the adults concern or anger, which is directed at the child, he may deflect this also. The more intense and concerned his parents become, the more he will direct their frustration back at them.

Finally, in each kick, hit, or throw the student practises, he is imagining a vulnerable or sensitive part of his opponent's body. It may be a kick designed to dislocate the knee, or rupture an internal organ; it may be a hold or a throw designed to break an arm or dislocate a shoulder, it may be a punch aimed at the nose, designed to force the cartilage back into the brain. One should be in no doubt that inherent in each movement is the intent to cause harm. It is this picture that the child has before him when he practises for hour after hour. To suggest that these things have no adverse affect on children would be naive. If they feel vulnerable in a world they perceive as violent, then we their guardians must seek to reassure them and give them the warmth that will lead them back into the safety and innocence of childhood.