



Parental Support for Kids in Karate

Karate can be great for kids. Many children these days get started in their karate training as early as the impressionable age of 5 or 6, and take to it well. Typically a junior brown belt in Japanese, Okinawan or Kenpo karate can be awarded to someone as young as 9, and a junior black belt at 12 (even younger in Taekwondo). Unfortunately, probably less than 1% of children who start will go all the way to their junior black belt. It's sad to see so many kids depart dejectedly or disinterestedly from a wonderful path to greater personal security, self-discovery, and a healthy mind and body. Most children clearly need something more than adults do if they are to become achievers in the martial arts; an important part of that something must come from parents.

When a parent enrolls a child in a martial arts program, it is reasonable to assume the parent would very much like to see that child succeed. Amazingly, this is not always the case. I have spoken to parents who couldn't care less if their child excelled at karate, or dropped out. They figure it's the child's own thing, requiring self-motivation, and needing only drop-off and pick-up service from the parent. They want no involvement of their own. I hope those parents will forgive me for saying that their attitude serves no one's interests, not even their own, unless they are satisfied to consider the training fee as covering no more than babysitting services.

The fact is that karate is a tough subject for children to pursue without parental support. It requires perseverance over the long haul, far past the point at which the novelty has worn off. In the beginning, almost everyone else in the class (having been there longer) is better than the new student. As time goes by, there are slumps to get past, and most children don't have the life experience to understand that if they persevere they *will* get through a slump to greater rewards. The unending process of kata practice and refinement doesn't make sense to kids accustomed to learning something and then quickly moving on to something else. Sparring can seem frightening to them at first, and the occasional bumps and bruises, though far less common than in many other contact

sports, seem somehow more threatening. In addition, martial arts training affects the mind in fundamental ways having to do with self-image, self-worth and mind-body harmony. These are among the most sensitive aspects of child-rearing. When a child's self-image is undergoing positive but unfamiliar revision, that child needs to know that his parents approve.

Each child brings a unique personality to karate. Some, it turns out, are temperamentally unsuited to the martial arts and will end up quitting no matter how much support they receive. Others will strive and persevere alone, in the face of discouragement, hardship and disappointments, achieving success against all odds. But most kids fall in the middle somewhere. That is, they have the potential within themselves to succeed *if* they are given a certain minimum amount of support which will vary with each child. Parents who want their child to succeed, and who don't want to see their money wasted, must make sure their child receives the needed level of support.

Most parents probably do want their children to succeed in karate, but they don't realize what is needed. Perhaps the biggest hindrance to parents who *want* to be supportive is their own lack of knowledge about karate. It's easier to give informed encouragement in a sport you once played yourself and understand better than the child does. Most parents are completely lost when it comes to understanding the details of techniques, training and competition in the martial arts. Others are uncertain as to how much emphasis they should place on *winning* when they talk to their child, or on what they can do at home to assist the child in making progress, or on how many classes per week are best, or on any number of other awkward unknowns.

What to do? It should first of all be remembered that the best resource for information is the child's own *sensei* (teacher). Parents should feel free to seek him out before or after class, or at other times mutually convenient, and ask all of their questions. This sort of consultation is free and *very much welcomed* by the sensei. He has spent many years acquiring a wealth of knowledge on this subject, and he wants nothing more than to pass it on for the betterment of his students. There is nothing "secret" about karate, at least at the kids' level, which parents and other non-participants aren't supposed to be told. So no one should feel awkward about asking.

This wouldn't be much of an editorial, however, if I didn't offer some basic suggestions of my own for how parents can be supportive of a child's martial arts training. So here are several, beginning with one for parents who are new to karate:

(1) **Take the time to learn something about karate yourself.** Begin by sitting in on as many classes as possible. Purchase the printed materials, manuals and supportive literature that are available and study them. Encourage your child to read them too, or read them aloud to him/her. The ultimate approach (a fine idea in itself) is to join the adult class as a formal student. Then you and your child can practice at home together. You may even enjoy it! And even if you don't stick with it all the way to black belt, you will at least have become "karate literate" to some extent, and you will have gained a basis of common experience to share with your child.

(2) **Cheerfully provide the necessary equipment.** This is not a luxury but a necessity. Almost every sport requires a uniform and equipment; karate is no different. You would not expect a child to play baseball without a glove, or hockey without a stick. So give the child what is needed for karate: at the very least a good *gi* (karate uniform),

mouth-guard, groin protector and fighting gloves. Foot protectors are also advisable. Yes, this does add to the total cost, but a good gi promotes pride, and the other equipment is necessary for safety.

(3) **Help the child have fun.** Statistical studies have shown that the chief reason why kids drop out of karate training is that it stops being fun for them. A positive parental attitude, laced with frequent compliments, praise, encouragement, little celebrations, laughter and interest will go a long way toward keeping it fun. Karate at its best is a unique combination of serious business and fun; help the child find that balance.

(4) **Talk frankly with your child about the dangers out there in the real world.** Emphasize that, although karate can be a lot of fun, it is not intended solely for sport. Every child understands the theoretical need for self-protection, but must occasionally be reminded (especially during slumps and less fun periods) that he/she is learning how to defend against real-life bad guys. To encourage a child in learning practical self-defense rather than totally depending on others for protection is to encourage personal growth, independence, maturity, self-actualization and self-esteem in a very basic way. Most children will take this seriously, and they will appreciate your interest in enhancing their level of personal safety, security and independence.

(5) **Carefully monitor the child's physical state.** No one can perform up to their potential and obtain maximum enjoyment from karate if they are not healthy, well rested and well fed. Children between the ages of 5 and 7 are especially prone to becoming frustrated, angry, weepy and unable to cope if they are hungry or tired; bumps and bruises seem to hurt more, and learning ability (along with the fun level) plummets. So make sure the child gets sufficient sleep, and a meal or snack before practice, timed so as to avoid feeling either too full or too hungry by practice time. Skip practice if the child is suffering from joint pain, pulled or strained (painful) muscles and ligaments, infections of any kind, excessive fatigue, or other problematic conditions. Avoid scheduling other rigorous activities, such as soccer practice, right before karate practice. Insist on a bathroom stop before practice starts, and check to be sure that a groin protector is in place if there is to be sparring that day. Keep fingernails and toenails clipped short. And be sure to see a doctor promptly about any potentially serious injuries or conditions that may develop; in fact, it is probably wise to check with a doctor *before* the child begins a karate program, just to be on the safe side.

(6) **Do not overemphasize the important of winning.** Emphasize instead how proud you are of the child just for being there in class and working hard. The same goes for tournaments and other competitions. Point out how many other children lack the courage and determination to compete at all. In an important way, simply to participate is to be a "winner." Winning awards is great when it happens, but *all* children need praise, encouragement and unconditional support, not just those few who become champions. Most children already naturally want to win, and they do not need more stress placed on them to do so. And, in any case, it should not be forgotten that the ultimate aim of karate training is to increase the chances of survival in a real-life threat situation, not to score points.

(7) **Don't judge the child's performance.** That is the sensei's job. The supportive parent must be unremittingly positive and complimentary. Sometimes you have to grit your teeth, bite your tongue and smile when you observe some obvious error or shortcoming. But generally it is best to let the sensei make that correction, even if you hold a belt rank in the same system. Your child much prefers it that way. A criticism from sensei can be taken on its technical merits, but a criticism from a parent can cut clear to the bone; even a minor criticism can be devastating to a child's motivation and attitude. For some parents this may be the most difficult rule to follow, but to break it, especially with young children, is to risk the entire program. Furthermore, aside from the emotional risks, parents need to remember that it takes many years of training and learning to master karate well enough to teach it. Parents lacking high belt rank are simply unqualified to coach, and can very easily give incorrect advice without realizing it. Confusion, safety risks and embarrassment may be the result. It's better to leave technical matters to the sensei and be content with your role as cheering section.

(8) **Help with memory training.** This does not necessarily involve criticizing performance as such, and is therefore an area where a parent can be of genuine assistance to a child who can comfortably accept it. Aside from learning katas first and walking them through side-by-side, making flash cards is one of the best approaches. Karate terms, techniques and information can all be included, drawn directly from the dojo manuals and publications. Cards can be added a few at a time, accumulating to perhaps as many as 200 to 300 by the time junior brown belt level is reached. Make it a ritual or a game to go through them periodically, especially just prior to testing for promotion. Utilize the terminology cards both ways, giving the Japanese word and asking for the English equivalent, then vice versa. Another way of helping would be to take notes for the child during private lessons or other class times when information is being dispensed that is not available as printed literature or handouts. It can then be reviewed later at home.

(9) **Encourage home practice.** Students who practice some on their own, at home, will always do better than those who don't. The child may or may not want the parents to watch or assist with the practice; but you can still make it as easy as possible by clearing a suitable space and seeing that the child is not interrupted by siblings or chores for a while. "Training" is a difficult concept for kids to accept, and even the tiniest leanings in that direction should be supported and encouraged. Don't force it too hard, though, or your efforts will be counterproductive.

(10) **Buy videos.** Most styles of martial arts these days are represented by instructional videos, including our own. These are a valuable aid to home practice, and are easier to use for some people (parents as well as kids) than written instructions. Commonly some of the highest ranking authorities in a given system will perform on these videos, providing high-quality demonstrations of ideal technique, form, rhythm and speed. In fact, especially when it comes to building sparring technique (which tends to be more individual than kata performance), it doesn't hurt to review the instructional sparring videos of some *other* styles in order to look for techniques that might suit your child.

(11) **Record video of the child's performance**, in competitions and occasionally in class. You can then review the video with the child at a later time, exulting together in the slightest victories and pointing out *only the good things* about the performance; let the child silently make note of any shortcomings on his own. Children are more perceptive than we sometimes give them credit for; if allowed to stand back and review their own performance as on a video, they can often spot the ways in which their technique does not yet match that of Sensei. Even with mirrored walls in the dojo it is difficult to perform in class while simultaneously critiquing one's reflection. Also record the performance of other competitors, and feel free to dispassionately review *their* good points and shortcomings with the child (there is less danger of such criticism being taken personally, and it can be very instructive).

(12) **Purchase some private lessons for the child**. Yes, this also costs more money. But private lessons are many times more effective than group classes in helping students learn. The instructor can concentrate closely on the child's every movement and can give much advice and instruction tailored to the child's specific needs, level and learning style. Furthermore, it is a fact that senseis typically teach certain techniques and approaches *only* in private lessons, thereby giving those students an advantage. Besides that, it makes the child feel special, demonstrates your confidence that they are worth special treatment, helps the bond to develop between student and teacher, and makes the child more confident about competing or about testing for promotion.

Of course, for some kids it may be possible to give *too much* support, to the point where they feel intruded upon or smothered by too much well-intentioned help, or where they are succeeding fully with less support and simply don't need more. As mentioned, each child is different. Some go-getters need help throttling *back* enough to avoid burnout. But most kids will gratefully accept all the support they can get, as long as it's not forced upon them and they feel comfortable saying "enough for now" when the parent gets overenthusiastic. It is virtually impossible to "spoil" children in karate with too much support because ultimately they must *perform* on their own. The most expensive gi in the world won't prevent them from being scored upon if they forget to block, nor will it make up for insufficient practice at testing time. You can't do their sweating for them...and that's the beauty of it.

Regardless of how much money parents can afford to spend, the bottom line in supporting kids in the martial arts is respect. Kids need to know that parents respect their physical needs, their abilities and limitations, their courage and suffering, their hard work and accomplishments, their fears and concerns, and their need for personal growth and self-protection. They need their parents to be interested in them, and proud of them, and to think highly of them for the good things they do, which helps them to bring out even more of their best selves. Parents who can do this will see benefits out of all proportion to the financial expense of karate training.

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