

Benefits of Martial Arts for Children

*“The ultimate aim of karate lies not in victory nor defeat, but in the perfection of character.”
-Gichin Funakoshi, founder of Shotokan Karate*

PREFACE

It is no secret that children who participate in athletic activities exhibit a tendency to perform better in other areas of life compared to those who do not. There exists much evidence of both the physiological and psychological benefits of participation in athletic activities for children and youth of all ages; children who are active in athletics tend to be more physically healthy, mentally astute, and emotionally secure.

In the Western cultures, this is most prominently visible in children who participate in team sports; in other parts of the world, however, the martial arts are regularly integrated into children’s lives. While team sports are certainly apt to benefit participants, the model for these competitive activities can have a tendency to favor some participants over others. And while a sense of competitiveness is healthy to a degree, if taken to an extreme it can lead to issues with children’s self-esteem and can also generate an attitude of aggression and combativeness.

Following is a discussion of the benefits of martial arts training for children, specifically children who are not candidates for participation in other athletic activities. As each child is unique, this article does not represent a comprehensive guide to all of the benefits a child is likely to receive; rather, the aim is to outline some of the most easily recognizable and beneficial elements of

martial arts training, which can be categorized as either physiological or psychological.

PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Aside from the obvious benefit of **learning self-defense**, regular participation in martial arts holds numerous physiological benefits for students. Broadly speaking, any physical activity will lead to **improvements in a child’s overall health and fitness**. This is especially pertinent in a time when childhood obesity and diabetes are global epidemics; it is generally agreed that children who have a low level of physical activity are more susceptible to these types of serious health issues, and it is the general consensus of healthcare professionals that children need physical activity as part of a balanced and healthy lifestyle.

Regardless of the style of martial arts being practiced, the physicality of training meets this need. Very few activities require the same level of physical involvement as martial arts. Regardless of the style, martial arts practice activities nearly every system in the body, including the nervous, respiratory, cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, and neurocognitive systems in equal measure.

Regular activation of these systems through physical activity will increase the capacity and capability of each; activities which utilize multiple body systems concurrently also help promote the

coordination of those systems. Benefits of these multi-system activities include increased neurocognitive function, advancement of gross and fine motor skills, improvements in hand-eye coordination, and development of physical poise and grace, to name only a few.

This is equally true of students who already exhibit a predisposition for athletic activities. Think of the parable of the linebacker who studies ballet to improve footwork and fluidity; this concept can also be applied to the athlete who participates in martial arts to improve physical conditioning of any sort: the soccer player who studies the advanced kicks of Taekwondo, the center forward who executes the evasive footwork of a boxer, or the wrestler who studies the groundwork of jujitsu.

There are also studies which relate the practice of martial arts to improvements in certain attention deficit disorders. While there are a number of opinions on these disorders and the prescribed method of treatment, martial arts provides a **physical outlet for the release of pent-up energy** that comes from an entire day of sitting stationary at a desk in school.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

While the physiological benefits of training can be the most immediately apparent, the psychological elements of martial arts activities stand to benefit students in equally (if not more) important ways.

Arguably, one of the most well-known psychological aspect of martial arts training is the mental **focus and clarity** required to execute techniques properly. In any given class, martial arts students

will often practice a single technique hundreds or even thousands of times. In a time where children's attention spans are shrinking to drastically low durations, the repetition of a single technique requires students be able to focus intensely for much longer than they will likely be used to. Any good instructor will demand perfection, and the number of repetitions of any techniques required to perfect it will require intense focus and dedication, which will also serve to increase a student's capacity for **memorization and information retention**. This will not only gradually increase a child's attention span, but will also **instill the principles of hard work and discipline**.

One of the pillars of becoming a martial artist is **respect for all**; students are expected to show courtesy and respect to their instructors, their training partners, and to their community as a whole (including parents, siblings, teachers, schoolmates, etc.). This leads to the generation of a **sense of self-respect** in the student as well by encouraging proper etiquette and manners at all times, inside and outside of training. This sense of self-respect will augment the development of discipline and focus, in that a student will eventually demand perfection of themselves as a matter of course.

Students will also develop in their **socialization skills**. Most martial arts training involves partner practice to some degree, and the very best martial arts schools work diligently to instill a sense of community and shared effort among the students and instructors. This type of practice requires both verbal and non-verbal communication, and creates a type of interpersonal interaction that is unique to the martial arts. Indeed, some students who are unable to "fit in" to a group or

classification in their regular daily lives can often find the open and inviting nature of a martial arts studio to be a source of comradery and friendship that simply cannot be found elsewhere.

A vitally important skill, and one that is often overlooked in our society, is the **capacity for conflict resolution**. The famous Chinese military general and philosopher Sun Tzu states in his book *The Art of War* that “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the highest skill.” Most contemporary martial arts promote non-violence over conflict; and while beginning martial arts students are often eager to “use” their knowledge, the further a student progresses the more they tend to realize the truth in Sun Tzu’s statement. Essentially, martial arts provide a safe arena in we examine violence so that we can know how to avoid it altogether.

Perhaps the most important trait developed through martial arts practice is **humility**. The process of mastering a martial art takes a lifetime, and in that time

every student will find an opponent who beats them. A common mantra in martial arts schools is “There is always someone better than you.” Learning what it means to be beaten (and, more importantly, to get back up) develops in students the essence of good character. Developing the ability to honestly identify, acknowledge, and improve own’s own shortcomings is the true nature of martial arts practice in today’s society.

Conclusion

Exhibited here are only some of the most prominent and visible benefits of martial arts training, both physiological and psychological. In the contemporary world, martial arts have transformed from a method of defeating an opponent into a path of self-improvement. The skills and principles learned through participating in the martial arts stand to benefit practitioners of any age, but hold a special degree of importance for children and youth.

Further Reading

Vertonghen, J., & Theeboom, M. (2010). The Social-Psychological Outcomes of Martial Arts Practise Among Youth: A Review. *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine*, 9(4), 528–537. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3761807/>

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