



Episode 71 – Martial Arts Benefits for Children | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Hey there, everyone! It's episode 71 of whistlekick martial arts radio. The only place to hear the best conversations about the martial arts like today's conversation about the ways children benefit from quality martial arts instruction. I'm the founder here at whistlekick but I'm better known as your host, Jeremy Lesniak. whistlekick, in case you don't know, makes the world's best sparring gear and some excellent apparel and accessories for practitioners and fans of traditional martial arts. I'd like to welcome our new listeners and thank all of you that are listening again. If you're not familiar with our products, you can learn more about them at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). All of our past podcast episodes, show notes and a lot more are at [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) and while you're over at the website, go ahead and sign up for the newsletter. We offer exclusive content to subscribers and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests. Now, today's episode is a little different from what we've done in the past. We had a member of the whistlekick online community write in with a suggestion that we discuss the benefits of martial arts training for children but from the idea that any martial arts training in any style can be a benefit to any child. We thought it was an interesting topic but we thought we needed more than just my perspective so, we reached out to one of our past guests, Master Tanya Panizzo, as a school owner, an instructor, a parent of a child in the martial arts and also, the pioneer of a really progressive autism spectrum disorder-only class, we thought she'd have some good things to say and she did so check this out. Master Panizzo, welcome back to whistlekick martial arts radio.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

Thanks for having me back!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

This is going to be fun. You're the first repeat and, of course, we're doing kind of a different episode, different format. We're not going to be telling your story today. Rather, just talk to you about something that you've got a good deal of experience with.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

Excellent! I'm ready! Ready when you are!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'm glad you are. I'm glad. So, the reason I wanted to have you back on this subject I wanted to talk to you about was we keep having this subject come up on the show about martial arts and youth and how it can be so beneficial and, of course, you as a school owner and someone who works with youth at different ages, at different developmental abilities, I think you've got a good perspective. You're also a parent. A parent of someone in martial arts so I think you've got a bunch of different angles you can bring to the table and we can hash this thing out.



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**Tanya Panizzo:**

Sounds good, sounds good!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

So, let's just go kind of way back. Let's unpack this from the beginning. I know you agree that martial arts is good for kids but why? If you had to boil that off.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

I think martial arts was good for kids for different reasons back in the day. 20 years ago, 15 years ago, there actually weren't a lot of kids in martial arts even though I think it was really beneficial for them. Society as a whole was very different. I think, more and more, though, as society changes, it's really a necessary activity for kids. Every kid that I've ever seen that interacted in any kind of martial art even if it was just for a very short period of time, has seen something really positive come out of that. I think for kids today, in particular, kids that are struggling with obesity and poor health habits, I think that martial arts is a great avenue for them to participate in a physical fitness activity that isn't reeled with a lot of pressure of a team. It's not necessarily a team sport even though it has a team feel because it's a class so they're able to progress in a lot of their fitness challenges and even some of their coordination challenges individually and I think that that's something that's really beneficial to kids today which is not really something that we saw 20 years ago. Kids were much more active. They were outside so it wasn't really something that was necessary 15, 20 years ago but I think, today, it's something that all kids can really benefit from and even the kids that are very active, that are playing other sports, soccer, football; they benefit because of all of the coordination that is enhanced through the martial arts. Their balance, their flexibility, their hand-eye, foot-eye coordination helps propel them in their other sports too so I think just going into the health and fitness aspect of that makes it beneficial for kids today, at least, that's the primary reason and I think outside of that, though, I think that it's one of the, I don't want to just call it a sport because, to me, martial arts is a more holistic thing than really just a sport. It involves, obviously, focusing their mind and developing their attitude in conjunction with their body which other sports can do but doesn't always have the focus on but I think it helps really build their confidence and their self-esteem and I think that's really something that kids are really lacking today, as well.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Sure, of course, you broke it down into the two components that I think most people would break martial arts instruction or, maybe not instruction, but benefit. You got the physical component and then the non-physical, what you want to term that as emotional or mental. There's really that line down the center for both of those elements to be in. Different children have different need, right? Some of them are going to be more lacking in the physical component and some of them are going to be more lacking in that mental, emotional component and martial arts supports and fosters growth in both.



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**Tanya Panizzo:**

Absolutely and I think coaches have a really big influence on kids in all sports. The one thing, too, that I think is great, though, about martial arts, as well, the instructor has a lot of the same attributes as a coach. In particular, on the sport side of martial arts, on Karate, Taekwondo, Jiu Jitsu if they're competitive with it, but even in the classroom environment, they have a lot of the coaching attributes that you would see like encouraging them to try and keep them going but what I think is also very different, because it's still a classroom setting, is that there's still a parental aspect to a martial arts instructor that isn't always there with a coach so there's a strong moral component that usually comes with most martial arts. I'm a Taekwondo practitioner but I also do Jiu Jitsu and the instructors in Jiu Jitsu are the exact same way. Talking about respecting each other, respecting authority, respecting themselves and that's something that parents often try to instill in their kids. It's reinforced by their martial arts teacher and then they're coached through their techniques and their fitness and everything else that's related to their martial arts as well by the same person so it's really nice because it's a balance but at the same time, it's helping parents out at the same time because I think we all recognize that, oftentimes, the parents may not have the biggest influence on the kid, in particular a certain age, and coaches and other teenage leaders have more influence so if we're all speaking that same language, it really helps the child.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Right, and one of the things that I've heard verbalized by, I can't even tell you how many parents over the years, is that the martial arts, that martial arts instructor role, because there isn't the governing body of a school board behind it, that instructor has a lot more leeway to adapt to what the child can need; assuming, of course, it's a good instructor and anyone that's ever worked with children, especially their own children, knows that as soon as someone else says something to a child, they respond very differently than when the parent tells the child so for a parent to say, be respectful, clean up your room and all that, it just kind of washes over them. It doesn't really have an impact quite often but the school teachers' not going to tell them those things. At least, not in a blunt, direct way that a martial arts instructor can. We're in a time now where schools get sued frequently because of the way some parents respond to the way a teacher may act with their children and, of course, we've got to have these universal policies that apply across everyone which really can tie the hands of a lot of school teachers so here, the martial arts instructor steps in.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

And there are still parents like that in martial arts but a good instructor and a good gym owner will stand firm to their beliefs. There's a normalization process that families will go through in any gym that these are the rules of the dojang or the dojo and we respect our parents in the seating area, not just our teachers on the mat and a good gym owner is going to recognize the child or the student's behavior anywhere and that's what's really nice about the martial arts gym. There are coaches in other athletics



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that do that as well but martial arts is deeply rooted in that respect for others and authority and so it's easy to build on that. What's really nice too, though, that I have seen over the years are parents that have also learned how to help improve their behavior at home by recognizing some of their own deficiencies. An example of that would be a parent saying, wow, they listen to you so well, Master Panizzo. They don't ever listen like that at home and I'll say something like, well, I don't count to five. I tell them and ask them to do it once and if they don't I give them push-ups and they know they're going to get the push-ups after that second or third time so they just do it on the first try and then, a parent will say, you know that's funny, I counted to 5 or 10 just like 10 times like the follow-through's not there. So, I think sometimes parent will say, they will have their own recognition that they are often not following through the way a coach or a teacher would so that's how we kind of collaborate together. Another example of that will be parent saying you're not testing for a belt, you don't make the grades in school and me reinforcing that as their Taekwondo teacher. Your parents have placed this requirement. You should do well in school. Either you're going to be delayed in your belt test and that's how that community aspect can be beneficial to the child and that's not always there, in particular, in high school athletics when kids are not always performing well with their academics or what have you but the sport is more important and it shouldn't be that way but in martial arts, a good dojang would not compromise the integrity of their program for that.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Right and I think that recognition that it's not about the sport, right? The end result is not putting a kid up on a podium or getting them to win a race, it's about that child's development.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

Right, or their belt test, right? Or getting them to next rank, exactly.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Right, right, so to recognize what really is important takes someone who buys into that, of course, whether it's an athletic coach or something. I can't speak for all coaches or why everyone goes into coaching but I know that when I was in high school, the majority of the coaches that I had in my sports were living vicariously through us. There was something that they didn't accomplish when they were in high school athletics, they wanted to go back and revisit for their own purposes and, of course, they were driving us to that so, there's that motivation for their own psychological needs.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

Satisfaction.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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Yeah, satisfaction and the priorities can skew but I want to go back to something you said and I think it's really key and I forgot the exact language you used but about the martial arts instructor sticking to their guns, holding to what they believe as important and that ability to not just let everyone into the program. We're talking about school, public school at least, everyone has the right to be there except in extreme circumstances. Any martial arts instructor can throw out any individual, child or adult, for any, but legally, protected reasons like gender or things like that so it gives so much more flexibility for building an environment that caters to those that want to be there versus those that have to be.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

Right and I think, oftentimes, that may depend on where the martial arts school is, not only, whether or not it's in its infancy, it's a new school, a new program or where it is demographically. I, myself, have, I think, 5 or 6 other Taekwondo schools, literally within a 7-mile radius of me so, for me, the way I look at it is this is my dojang. This is how we do things here and culturally, we want to keep everything intact and that's really important to us because we think that, ultimately, that is how our school will grow and there have been some that have not fit here and they go elsewhere than some that have left and then come back that they recognize, oh, you don't know what you have until you leave it but that may depend. Some businesses may really rely on their clientele and may make some of those sacrifices to the integrity of their program to keep their clientele and that's the decision of the gym owner, of the academy owner, right? They have to decide that. For me, just as parenting is a balance between protection and exposure, that's really what it is. The dojang is a balance of you contributing to them and them contributing to you. that's really what it is. It's a mutual relationship. As every family walks into the gym, they're contributing their time and their energy to your space and you have to meet them halfway but not everybody fits and the best thing an academy owner can do is refer them to another facility where they may fit or get their needs met but I'm 100% advocate of sticking to what you believe is right for your school and then the school will grow. Not everybody does, though. Believe that.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Right, right, and I think it's interesting that one of the things that I wanted to bring up, and I'll tie this back in in a second, here in the martial arts, so often, so many people are making the criticism of other styles. Jiu Jitsu's better than Karate or Taekwondo's better than Krav Maga or whatever, those aren't even tapped in all the time in bar rooms and on the internet and all you have to do is post any style comment on anybody doing martial arts on YouTube and you'll get bombarded but here we have something that threads through all, at least, traditional styles of martial arts: the benefit to children. It happens, it's there, you mentioned that. It doesn't really matter what style it is, it's going to come through.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

Yeah, I agree.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

So, the thing that, I think, is really interesting is, despite the fact that, I think we can all admit, that martial arts have differences. Taekwondo is not the same as Karate and even your Taekwondo and my Taekwondo are going to be different just because we're training in different places. We can admit that but we can't always admit as school owners that someone, a student may be a better fit at another school, and so, to recognize that, to be strong enough in what you're trying to present and how you're trying to present it and recognize it, there are going to be differences and that's, not only, okay but it's beneficial to those involved and to network and say, hey, this kid's going to do better over here with that style of instruction.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

Right, right, no, I totally agree and I think, too, it takes a martial arts owner that is secure with what they're teaching to be able to do that and there are many out there. I mean, of course, there are some that are not and I think it's the same way for other athletics, I do agree. I had played school sports. I had amazing coaches that really helped develop me, not just athletically but as a person, as well, and I think that school sports were wonderful for me in that regard. I do feel, though, because I was doing martial arts at the same time that I did have an edge over others that were not and a lot of that was related to persistence and dedication and my work ethic because that was something that was ingrained in me in the martial arts but I think, too, that not every gym owner is comfortable doing that. It takes a strong person to do so but as long as you are focused on the student and what is going to benefit the student, even if that means that they leave, not all competitive programs are the same. Not all gyms offer classes that can help the child. We offer ASD classes here but I'm the only school in the area that does so.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

What's ASD for those who may not know?

**Tanya Panizzo:**

Autism Spectrum Disorder so those that are on the spectrum, Asperger's, Autism; we have particular classes of a various levels for those students but not all Taekwondo or Karate schools can teach kids that have special needs and to say that you do, when you really can't, or they can be better served somewhere else, is really not true to what martial arts is anyway, right? Because it's all about being true to you helping others so not everybody is there but I think that in martial arts and in other sports, there are a good number out there that will, hopefully, want to benefit the student even if that means that they're not participating within their own school.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

So, you've mentioned that you've had your school for a period of time and I'm sure you do some things differently now when you did when you started with regards to children and teaching children, so if



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we've got somebody out there that's listening that maybe wants to implement some changes or they're new, give us a couple things that people can do to help grow a strong and successful youth program.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

For me, it comes down to something that my dad said related to parenting. Discipline with love and love with discipline. Kids need to know that they will be disciplined and by whom and they also need to know that they will be loved and accepted and by whom. So, as a Taekwondo teacher, by love, I don't necessarily mean parental love with the hug and kiss and all that type of stuff but what I mean is they need to know that they are accepted by you, no matter what. High fives, we use the word yes a lot in my dojang because we do want to reinforce what they do well. What we also do is we scale our discipline in the dojang so when kids begin, we keep it very fun and very positive. As I mentioned, we use the word yes a lot in correction. It's not that we're afraid of the word no. I mean, I'm not afraid of the word failure and no or anything like that but we try to keep a very fun and positive atmosphere in our beginner level and in intermediate, we begin to start sprinkling in more stern way about running a class, a more structured way. We still have that positive reinforcement but now, the expectation has been raised and we grade them up accordingly. Once they get to the advanced level, they're now inspected from head to toe, they're expected to be there on time. They're expected to look a certain way and we still have fun in the class but they have been slowly normalized through the disciplinary process. You can't bring kids in on the first week and give them push-ups for not knowing something. You have to kind of break them in and normalize them through the process and I think, too, another thing that we do is we break the class into 4 segments. There are 3 curriculum items and one thing that's considered as fun. Now, the curriculum items could be fun to kids but we always finish with fun so it might be puzzle tag on the mats, some other games we have like a red light, green light game that we play related to Taekwondo techniques and all of those kids think that are fun and they're learning in the process and it's just a way to balance it out and we always finish with that element so that when they get off the mat, their last impression is hey, that was fun and I'll be honest, I learned that from my daughter's gymnastics class because they would spend an hour on beam, an hour on bar and then an hour on the vaults or whatever they do at her class and they finish by jumping in the pit, the big foam pit, and as bored as she looks in everything else, she always came out saying it was great because she got to jump in the foam pit so I think it's the way you finish so that's something that we do here. I don't know if that is what other gyms do but it's a methodology that's really worked for us and the kids do very well here.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Great, really appreciate you sharing that with us and thanks for coming back on the show and giving us your expertise.

**Tanya Panizzo:**

Thank you for having me!



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

What did you think of that? It's a different format, for sure, no planned questions, it's shorter and you certainly got to hear more of my opinions than you do in a normal show. Feedback is, of course, always appreciated so please leave us a comment somewhere, either on the website or on social media. You can find the show notes and a place for comments at [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) and, as with social media, we're on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram, all with the username whistlekick. If you want to be a guest on the show or maybe you have an idea for a show topic like with did for today's show, go ahead and fill out the form on the website. Don't forget to subscribe to our newsletter so you can stay up on everything that we're doing. You can learn more about our products at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). That's all for today so, until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!