

Karate-Do and People with Special Needs

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My name is Andrew Wildasinn and hold the rank of Nidan and testing for Sandan. The paper I am writing is about the benefits of martial art training have on people with intellectual dysfunction. My son is on the autism disorder spectrum and is somewhat high functioning. The autism spectrum or autistic spectrum describes a range of conditions classified as neurodevelopmental disorders. These disorders are characterized by socialization problems and communication difficulties, stereotyped or repetitive behaviors and interests, and in some cases, cognitive delays. The purpose of starting this karate class was to see if my son and others with similar disorders could participate in karate training as well as benefit from it.

In 1963 Eunice Kennedy Shriver came up with the concept of the Special Olympics as a day camp for people with intellectual disabilities. It was to provide them with the therapeutic effects of physical fitness and sports. In 1968 she organized the first International Special Olympic Games. She opened peoples mind to look at what people with special needs are able do instead of what they are not able to do. In 2003 judo was introduced in to the Special Olympics and was put in divisions not by weight or gender but according the participants capabilities. This is the first martial art competition in the Special Olympics. Karate has not yet been allow. However, many instructors have taken on people with special needs to teach them the martial arts and show proof that the martial arts are therapeutic for these people as well as everyone else who are willing to train.

In 2006, I decided with support of Sensei Aponte and the USKL Yudansha board, to teach karate to people with special needs. My son was very influential in making this decision. My son Kaler has autism and I wanted to share karate with him. Where we live soccer, baseball and other activities are offered for people with special needs. I was concerned about trying to teach karate to Kaler one on one because of some of the behavior he displayed. I assumed that he would not listen to me. As I watched my son and the other children kick the soccer ball and catch a baseball it occurred to me that there is no reason that they could not do karate. In addition, I realized that the sports the kids were playing were seasonal and karate is practiced on a regular basis. It then occurred to me that maybe Kaler would not act out his rebellion in a group setting. I made fliers and handed them out at Kaler's games.

First off I will say that I have not been in the position teach all people with special needs. I know of instructors that do however they do it as a full time job and have a lot of help. I am only able to work with people that are ambulatory, can train without the use of an aide or "shadow", and have somewhat of an attention span. I have found that some children are unable to control their behavior and therefore become disruptive.

Some parents would not let their kids to train in karate for fear of making their children violent, or that the violent kids would become more violent. Several parents worried that their children might fail and therefore would not let their children participate. Parents are also worried that

their kids would be slower than others and be left behind in class. These are all legitimate concerns. A few parents took the risk and realized that their concerns were unfounded.

Teaching people with special needs takes a lot of patience. Their attention span is minimal so I have to keep their attention by “going outside the box”. I must admit I use humor and as a result the kids, their parents, and I have a lot of fun. The kids I work with have difficulty communicating and limited attention span. I make the class more relaxing hoping that it minimizes any extra stress. I think this kind of atmosphere has improved our communication with each other. It is difficult for the kids to retain information anyway but only having class once or twice a week makes it even more difficult to retain information. I am very fortunate to have three people who are as passionate as I am about working with these students. Christy, Daniel, and Matthew have been helping me with teaching the special needs class for many years. They have been there to give special attention to those who need it, or teach the class while I get with students individually.

It is generally agreed that regular physical exercise promotes physical and mental health, but what are the benefits in people with Autism Spectrum Disorders. In the adaptive karate class, like any other classes, we repeatedly go over kihon, kata, and kumite. Through repetition the students memorize the basics, kata, and five step sparring but at a different pace and not so refined. When I started out with this class I was skeptical about what kind of progress the students would make. To my excitement I found that the students could memorize the basic blocks both double hand and single hand. I added on to the different blocks back knuckle strikes and punches. They are able to memorize the names of the blocks, kicks, and stances in English, now we are working using the Japanese terms. We do kata as a group repetitiously during class. When they memorize the moves in kata I can see in their faces that they are pleased in their accomplishments. I have them do individual kata in front of class which they are able to do with no signs of nervousness or fear. As a matter of fact I see a lot of smiling from these students and their parents are pleased as well. This was a group of kids who were very guarded when they started karate. In the beginning some of the answers to my questions were grunt like responses. Now I let them take turns leading the class in stretching exercises which demonstrates to me their confidence has improved. There was a study done in 2010 by the University of Wisconsin physical therapy department that confirmed that kids with autism who trained in martial arts grew more socially assertive and cooperative. They exhibited better balance and motor coordination, and eye contact improved. Greater self-esteem and concentration was also reported (Moffitt n.d.). There was another study done to see how long term kata practice would affect social dysfunction in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The study required participants of the exercise group to exercise Kata techniques for 14 weeks, while participants of the control group received no exercise. Results revealed that Kata techniques training significantly improved social dysfunction in the exercise group. It was concluded that teaching martial arts techniques to children with ASD leads to significant improvement in their social interactions (F. Bahrami, A. Movahedi, S.M. Marandi, A. Abedi, Movahedi, & Marandi, 2012). My experience in teaching adaptive karate also confirms many of the same conclusions in these two studies.

I hope to teach adaptive karate as long as I am able. Hopefully more parents will become open minded regarding the therapeutic benefits karate can have on their children and adults with special needs. In his book "Karate-Do My Way of Life", Master Funakoshi writes " One of the most striking features of karate is that it may be engaged by anybody, young or old, strong or weak, male or female". How true this statement is. Master Funakoshi would be pleased to know that even people with special needs are being taught and learning karate.

References

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