

CHILDREN IN THE DOJANG

An examination of the teaching methods used for our younger students aged between 3 and 6 years old and how best to adapt our classes to accommodate for them.

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INTRODUCTION

A typical Taekwon-Do club has a wild variety of members ranging from the very young to the older students.

Most instructors will tailor their classes according to the students before them and an experienced instructor will adapt the content of the class and the language used to reflect the age and/or experience of the student membership before them.

Our younger students have different needs to adults and are active in different ways, adult exercise guidelines and training philosophies should not be imposed on children. The natural activity pattern of children playing in the playground is characterized by sporadic bursts of moderate to vigorous-intensity activity with brief periods of low-intensity activity or rest as needed. While children often raise their heart rates into their target heart rate zone, they are intermittently active and often choose to exercise in an interval-type pattern characterized by haphazard increases and decreases in exercise intensity. Children are concrete rather than abstract thinkers and do not see the benefit of prolonged periods of training.

Younger children respond well to short sharp bursts of exercise in varying intensity, i.e. Fartlek/Interval training which is commonly used for footballers.

Children can remain physically active for up to 30 minutes or more provided that exercise intensity varies throughout the session and that children are given the opportunity to take short breaks where needed, i.e. a warm up followed by stretching followed by line work/sparing etc with a hydration break in between.

The key is to value the importance of physical activity and help children develop healthy habits and behaviour patterns that persist throughout their training into adulthood.

Instructors who model and support participation in developmentally appropriate fitness activities that are safe, fun, and supported by cultural norms can have a powerful influence on a child's health and activity habits. Well organised training sessions that give students the opportunity to experience the mere enjoyment of physical activity can have long-lasting effects on children's health and well-being.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on the youngest members of our art, I will set out some examples of things that I use to help teach them and help them to gain the basic skillsets that we strive to achieve in the early stages of our training.

APPROPRIATE AGE

As instructors we are concerned with the safety of our students as a whole and therefore must take into account the requirements of the many as well as the requirements of the few.

Most instructors separate their 'Junior' and 'Senior' classes and often impose a minimum age restriction before we are prepared to take on a new student.

Quite often we ask that the new student is at least 4-5 years old but why do we do this?

Most children across Europe do not start school until they are at least six years old and some countries do not ask their children to start school until they are approximately seven years old. In fact, six years old is the most common school starting age world-wide, why is that?

Is it because of the child's lack of attention span or lack of ability to grasp the concepts that are required to give our children a decent education?

Is it down to a student's ability to listen and follow instructions?

Is it down to the physical attributes of the child?

ATTENTION SPAN

It is generally accepted that a child can concentrate for roughly 2 to 3 minutes per year of age, so:

The attention span of a 3-year-old is approximately 6 to 9 minutes.

The attention span of a 4-year-old is approximately 8 to 12 minutes.

The attention span of a 5-year-old is approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

The attention span of a 6-year-old is approximately 12 to 18 minutes.

The above-mentioned attention span is a general rule of thumb. There are different external factors like hunger span, interest, environmental and distractions that also play a major role in determining a child's attention span.

An average 4-year old child will be able to spend more time with games and puzzles than a 3 year old, but the average attention span a 4-year old child is still just 5–10 minutes.

When planning training classes for children in these earlier years, you should keep the child's attention span in mind. Even if the little ones can stick to an activity for half an hour, on average, you must expect less.

A 5-year old child should be able to concentrate on an activity for 10–15 minutes, but this will depend upon the nature of the activity and other variables like their interest, the time of the day, mood and so on.

As already mentioned, attention span in children increases with age. So, a 6 year-old can attend to a task for 12–20 minutes on average. Children in this age group can even sustain attention to one task of their interest for as long as 30 minutes.

Our younger students must be motivated and provided with interesting and engaging activities to help them retain attention in the class. Instructors can help keep their attention by providing cues and encouragement to help them stay on the task before the child loses interest.

It is much more effective to work on short tasks and provide frequent breaks than to try and sit through an hour with a 4-year old.

A great way to refocus a child during an activity is with movement, so a quick run around between bouts of concentration is always a good idea.

Focus/listening and puzzle games will also improve the younger students concentration which will ultimately help them to concentrate and complete their patterns correctly.

LENGTH OF CLASS

Given that younger students clearly do not have the attention span of the older children, you do not need to have a long class for them, a class between 30 and 45 minutes is plenty of time for children between 4-6 years old.

REMOTE TRAINING

My daughter started training at just 3 years old in the Dojang and whilst she enjoyed her training in these early days, this was unfortunately short lived as the Covid Pandemic hit the world and many Dojangs were forced to close and/or move to online training.

Our Dojang, like many others, moved to online training which is not suitable for our youngest members. It was extremely difficult to get my daughter to concentrate on the Zoom (online video platform) Taekwon-Do class for any more than 5 minutes, so her class training suffered as a result of the same.

It was a blessing when we were finally able to return to the Dojang and she was able to fully enjoy her Taekwon-Do training again. However, by this point, she was a little older and able to concentrate in the classes more efficiently.



TEACHING POINTS

How should we approach teaching the younger students between the ages of 3 and 6 years old?

Here are the key factors to adhere to when training children:-

- Provide close supervision and listen to each child's concerns;
- Speak to children using words that they understand;
- Realize that children are active in different ways to adults;
- Design activities that ensure equal participation and enjoyment;
- Play down competition and focus on skill improvement, personal successes, and having fun;
- Remind children that it takes time to learn a new skill and get in shape;
- Offer a variety of activities and avoid regimentation if possible;
- Finish the class with a bit of fun.

Children are mimics and learn by mirroring their instructors or fellow students. I have noticed from personal experience that children are much more comfortable copying what the instructor is doing (or other students), especially when performing fundamental movements and/or patterns.

When I am taking the young children's classes, I always try to incorporate Taekwon-Do orientated games as part of their training regime.

I include a few Tae Kwon-Do games to break up the sessions and encourage the children to concentrate by rewarding them with a fun game (which they don't realise is Tae Kwon-Do orientated as well).

By way of an example, if the students are having trouble lining up correctly at the start of the class, I turn it into a game.

I am sure that I am not the only instructor that sometimes has difficulty getting 4-5 year olds to stand in the right place, they all just seem to huddle together and rank goes out of the window.



After spending some time putting all of the students in the correct place, I ask them to remember where they are standing (whether it is next to a spot of dirt on the floor, a T mark, or below a light etc) and give them a few moments to take note of where they are and who they are standing next to.

I then make them run around the room and after a small delay, I ask them to line back up again in exactly the same place (whilst counting down from 10).

You would be surprised how much quicker the students can line up if you start counting down and how much easier it is to get them to line up in the correct place.

If you do this a few times throughout the session, you should notice that the students will line up much better than they did before.

It is also worthwhile adding some group exercises and/or balancing exercises into the mix, especially if there are a few stragglers that don't line up within your 10 second count. But as I am sure you will appreciate, 10 seconds can be a bit longer or shorter at the instructors discretion (to add another fun element in for the children).

Walking Stance Punch

Another Taekwon-Do game that I use quite frequently is an adaptation of walking stance punch.

It's a very simple principle and I start by getting all the students to line up in class formation and then ask them to step forward in a walking stance obverse punch.

I then turn it into a game by asking the students to step 'FORWARD' or 'BACKWARDS' at increasing intensity.

When the students are comfortable with the standard forwards/backwards motion, I change the meaning of the commands (i.e. Backwards means Forwards and Forwards means Backwards), add in a Freeze option (asking the students to freeze mid motion which works on their balance) and attempt to put them off by purposely telling them one direction and moving in the other.

This always generates big smiles from the students and not only works on their fundamental movements but also develops their concentration skills, lateral movement, balance and willingness to listen to the instructor.



Other Helpful hints

Children perform Taekwon-Do techniques much more effectively when they have a target to focus on or an item to block against.

If you don't give them something specific to focus on, you are more likely to get arms and legs waving about the place without specific purpose.

As children tend to be visual and kinetic learners (learning through movement), their techniques are far more focussed when you use tools such as focus paddles and kick shields etc. The children can see what they are doing and always enjoy hitting the pads.

I rarely teach a children's class without a paddle to hand and I have been known to take a swimming noodle or two to the children's classes to either use as something to jump over or as an attacking tool to encourage the children to block correctly with the correct blocking tool.

ALWAYS END WITH SOMETHING FUN

When approaching the end of a class, I recommend finishing the class with a fun game or activity.

The children will then associate the fun at the end of the class with the whole Taekwon-Do lesson.

It's always nice to see them running back to their parents with a big smile on their face. This not only reassures the parents that their children are enjoying the sessions but it also encourages the children to continue to want to come training.

BENEFITS OF TAEKWON-DO FOR KIDS

Taekwon-Do is a good combination of physical activity and mental discipline and if taught correctly, will be a huge benefit to children, it will improve their:-

- Confidence;
- Self Discipline;
- Self Control;
- Fitness;
- Flexibility; and
- Social structure (friends).

NOTES FOR INSTRUCTORS

The instructor is always going to be a big influence on all students but especially on our younger members.

The majority of instructors tend to split their classes between 'Juniors' and 'Seniors' and usually have assistant instructors to split the classes further again. A typical junior class will last for 1 hour and a typical senior class will last between 1 and 2 hours.

Usually the junior class is suitable for children up to 13/14 years old but it is quite common to see some of the older children training in the senior class (if the instructor feels that this will benefit the student).

There is however a vast range in the abilities of the children in the junior class. If you put a 3-5 year old next to a 10-12 year old, there is a huge difference between their mental and physical capabilities.

Whilst a separate 'Children' class would be preferable in most circumstances, this is not always practical:-

- *The instructor may not have time to take on another class.*

Most instructors classes take place after they finish work and the instructor may quite simply not have the time to take on another class.

- *The venue may not be available for an additional 30-45 minutes.*

Many instructors teach in local authority run leisure centres and/or schools which already have a full timetable of activities.

- *Due to the number of students.*

It would not be feasible to set up an additional class for a single student, so student numbers need to be balanced against the instructors extra time and hall hire fees.

So whilst it would certainly be beneficial for the students to have a separate children class, the fallback option would be to separate the junior class by using an assistant instructor (in order to minimise the disruption caused by the younger students and to give them the attention that they need).

An additional 30 minutes added to your hall hire could create a suitable children class and this would certainly reduce the disruption in your junior class (and allow you to expand both classes) and allow you to concentrate on the 3-6 year olds and give them the attention that they deserve.

CONCLUSION

With qualified instruction, enthusiastic leadership and adherence to safety issues, children can safely enhance their fundamental movement ability and be better prepared for successful and enjoyable participation in all aspects of Taekwon-do.

If you adhere to the above guidance/principles, this will benefit the children and create a more rounded individual and a more competent Taekwon-Do practitioner.

Children are the future of Taekwon-Do.