

by Michael S. Shapiro, Ph.D.

Tae Kwon Do



THE SPECIAL SELF-ESTEEM and social issues faced by most children with AD/HD are evident to those who work with them, including parents, teachers and mental health professionals. Participation in a team sport is often viewed as a great way to “normalize” the child with AD/HD and to help him or her deal with some of these issues. We have all seen children with AD/HD struggle to find their place in the social “pecking order” as they join team sports such as soccer, basketball and Little League baseball. At the same time, we have had our hearts broken as we see these children bear the ridicule of their teammates because of their restlessness, impulsiveness or inability to pay attention to the game. Unfortunately, the actions (or inactions) of a single child can sometimes tip the balance between victory and defeat. While all parents see the value of team sports as an “outlet” for excessive energy, no one wants to see their child teased or even worse, relegated to the bench or “deep-right-field” for the entire season.

With this in mind, whenever I meet with parents to review treatment options for their children, I always discuss participation in a martial art, in particular Tae Kwon Do. Like its Japanese counterpart, karate, Tae Kwon Do is a martial art of Korean origin that emphasizes hand strikes and fancy kicks. The benefits of Tae Kwon Do are, in large part, identical to those enjoyed by any and all dedicated martial artists: physical fitness, self-confidence, discipline and the ability to protect oneself if necessary. However, a child with AD/HD is apt to reap several benefits that are especially important in the context of his or her disorder.

For children with AD/HD to learn effectively, new tasks and concepts should be broken down into small, manageable pieces, and some type of reward or reinforcement should be offered as they progress. This strategy is epitomized by the belt-rank system of Tae Kwon Do, which allows the child to enjoy the feeling

of accomplishment, following the success of learning the new skills that characterize each rank. New concepts are built on old ones—this is the main premise of the “mastery learning” technique that is so beneficial for children with AD/HD. While most Tae Kwon Do classes provide the repetition (in the form of drills) that is required to attain mastery, they also provide frequent changes in activity to capture and maintain the student’s attention. In addition, the martial arts student with AD/HD will be given ample opportunity to “burn-off” pent-up physical energy in a fun, exercise-oriented setting. Since Tae Kwon Do students are allowed to progress at their own pace, the success or failure of an entire team is not dependent on one individual’s performance. At the same time, the children can still enjoy the camaraderie and social interaction of a popular sport.

Self-control and self-restraint are, of course, among the Tae Kwon Do skills that are especially valuable for children with AD/HD. Parents often ask me whether or not these skills can actually be learned by children who, by the very nature of their disorder, sometimes seem incapable of self-restraint. It is for this reason that these attributes *must* be taught to the child through the use of structure, consistency and discipline. From a purely physical standpoint, activities such as working on a “form” (one of the choreographed series of movements that the student must learn at each belt level) can help the child with AD/HD learn how to do what is naturally difficult for him—work within a structured framework of activity rather than follow his own impulses. In turn, this engenders feelings of security and self-control. The well-run *dojang* (Tae Kwon Do studio) places the child in an environment that imposes consistent rules and limits that are the same day after day. Only in this kind of environment can a student with AD/HD learn that there are consequences for every behavior, both good and bad.

Tae Kwon Do—with its emphasis on personal victories and individual progress—can deliver success in a way that no other discipline can.



Things to Look For in a Tae Kwon Do School

- Affiliation with a national or worldwide governing organization (for example, the American Taekwondo Association or the World Taekwondo Federation).
- There are also some very good “independent” schools, but these should be well-established schools with a good reputation in the community.
- A certified instructor who has experience working with children, especially children with special needs (parents should observe classes themselves before signing on the dotted line).
- An atmosphere that encourages (but doesn’t necessarily insist on or require) tournament competition.—Michael S. Shapiro, Ph.D.



A fear often expressed by parents is that Tae Kwon Do will only make their impulsive child even more aggressive by “arming” him or her with more efficient physical “weapons.” This would, in fact, be the case in an environment that encourages aggressive behavior. However, all Tae Kwon Do students are first made to learn the five tenets of their art: courtesy, integrity, perseverance, *self-control* and indomitable spirit. Students in the *dojang* are trained to use non-aggressive methods to resolve disputes, and to avoid physical confrontation as much as it is within their power to do so. When they learn to spar, they are taught how to apply their techniques in a highly controlled situation that requires strategy, planning and a “cool head.” This is precisely what is required for the highly impulsive child with AD/HD who, by nature, tends to leave no time between thought and action.

Finally, Tae Kwon Do can be integral in counter-acting the problems with self-esteem and compliance that children with AD/HD invariably develop as a consequence of being in constant trouble. Since these children are so often stigmatized because of their

disruptive behaviors, they come to view themselves as “weird” or “stupid.” Friendless and frustrated by what they see as their own inability to “do the right thing,” they develop apathy or defiance towards authority. The Tae Kwon Do school offsets this by stressing the long-standing and honored tenets of respect and loyalty to the instructor. In fact, the astute Tae Kwon Do instructor will usually make the child’s participation contingent upon showing appropriate politeness and respect in class. These newfound attributes usually generalize into increased compliance, respect and obedience at home and in school.

All school-aged children require successful experiences in order to grow into psychologically healthy adults. This is especially true for the child with AD/HD, who typically has few of these experiences. With its emphasis on personal victories and individual progress, Tae Kwon Do can set these children up for success in a way that no other discipline can. Although it should be only part of a multi-disciplinary approach to AD/HD, it will always be included in my arsenal of recommendations to parents. ■

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