

THE BENEFITS OF ITF TAEKWON-DO FOR CHILDREN

by Mr Rod Johnson, V dan, Canada

In Taekwon-Do we often talk about the benefits of martial arts training for children. An ITF instructor knows that studying Taekwon-Do is far more than a fun after school activity. It is a unique training program (with benefits) that empowers children with skills and strategies for lifelong success. Taekwon-Do classes help children develop self-respect, self-discipline, improved focus, courtesy, goal setting, the desire to excel, social awareness and, of course, self defence skills.

A benefit can be defined as something that promotes or enhances (inspires) well-being. There are a number of ways to evaluate a child's well being. Typically it can be measured by his/her physical, psychological, cognitive and social make up. Basically a child who is active, creative, happy, focused, confident and comfortable with his/her peers is considered to be well-adjusted.

While some of these domains are more subjective than objective – and no child will be perfect – it is easy to see the positive benefits ITF Taekwon-Do classes will have on a child's fitness, confidence, social skills, and self-esteem.

Physical

The physical benefits of ITF Taekwon-Do training are obvious. After a few months, a child's strength, flexibility, balance and gross motor skills are noticeably improved. Simple exercises such as push ups, plank position and crunches help to increase upper body and core strength while practising stances (including the dreaded *niunja sogi*, L-stance) makes legs stronger and improves body balance. Regarding flexibility even the simplest stretching exercises performed correctly will leave children surprised at how flexible they actually are.

An additional physical benefit of Taekwon-Do training is improved body co-ordination or proprioception. For children who are clumsy, uncoordinated, and have difficulty performing basic normal childhood tasks, improved proprioception is a gift. Proprioception, often referred to as the sixth sense, was developed by the nervous system as a means to keep track of and control the different parts of the body. Specialized sensory receptors in the muscles, joints and connective tissues



enable the body to process information from a variety of stimuli, and turn that information into action. Taekwon-Do classes train proprioceptors to function at higher levels giving children the confidence to try new activities.

Psychological

Achievement is a wonderful thing, and a little success goes a long way. The ITF Taekwon-Do curriculum provides short, intermediate and long term goals to keep children inspired and motivated. With each achievement, however modest, a child's confidence and self-esteem grows. For most children the BIG goal is to become a *black belt*. On the road to *black belt* there are many benchmarks (goals) which boost self-esteem. Gup tests, competitions, assisting in class, or maybe even breaking their own world record for push ups help children believe in themselves. And why not, Taekwon-Do is an individual pursuit. Students are required to take responsibility for themselves to excel. This creates a deep sense of self confidence and self reliance.

Intellectual development / cognition

It is well known that exercise provides a positive impact on health and physical development. Research has also shown that the more regularly a child participates in an exercise program, the greater the increase in their mental awareness and ability to think methodically (cognition). Functions

carried out by the brain, including memory, planning, problem-solving, construction, calculation, and attention are all improved through Taekwon-Do training. These benefits are the result of:

- increased oxygen flow to the brain
- more efficient synaptic activity
- stimulated neurogenesis
- increased production of various hormones responsible for growth and development of the brain.

It should be noted that the intensity at which physical activity is performed also has an impact on the association between exercise and increased cognitive functioning. Although increases are found regardless of what type of exercise is performed, greater increases are seen when participants execute high intensity routines. The more engaged a child is in his/her Taekwon-Do class the more benefit they will get from the session.

Social

The Taekwon-Do learning environment is uniquely supportive. A Taekwon-Do class is a form of group learning through *social experience*, where a student develops both Taekwon-Do techniques and valuable life skills such as co-operation and teamwork. At the same time, a student learns to function as part of a group and gains a sense of camaraderie with their classmates. What could be better...



Children typically want to be popular and have friends. Even one good friend can be enough companionship for a child who is more parent-oriented than peer-oriented. Taekwon-Do classes give students the sense that they belong to a greater community, not only because the martial arts have such

an extensive history and culture, but also because the students and instructors share the same healthy pursuit and experience the challenges together. For children who experience difficulties making friends, their Taekwon-Do classes bring them together with others who have the same interests. As their Taekwon-Do skills improve so do their senses that they are valuable and competent in their social networks.

Student Oath – Conclusion

What sets ITFTaekwon-Do apart from regular sporting activities are the student oath and its tenets. The student oath and its tenets guide children through difficult decisions and help them contribute to the community in a positive way. The student oath encourages children to envision

a world based on equality and harmony. Through the tenets of Taekwon-Do children embrace values which will make them more definite about themselves and more caring of their friends and neighbours. Both help create more positive, thoughtful children. When combined with the many

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other benefits already discussed children grow intellectually, socially and physically through their Taekwon-Do classes. Kids may not realise this but as they are jumping, kicking and laughing with their friends they are feeling great about themselves and more ready for the challenges tomorrow will bring.



Mr Rod Johnson is an internationally certified instructor and class A umpire based in Vancouver, Canada. He began Taekwon-Do in 1983 with Grand Master Park Jong Soo. He has trained in Canada, Spain, Wales, Argentina and Morocco. He recently umpired at World Championships and World Cup in Quebec City, Italy and Argentina.

Mr J is the co-creator of Kid Kicks on the ITF website, a web page dedicated to promoting the values and benefits of ITF Taekwon-Do for children. Mr J owns Jon Sun's Taekwon-Do Academy (www.jstkd.ca). You are always welcome to visit him at his dojang. He is married with one teenage son.

