

Kids, Karate & Bullying ...



Jonathan Rabinovitz

The phone call was not unusual. Several parents have contacted me over the years and the conversations have roughly been the same.

"I have a child who is being bullied at school and his dad and I are really worried and were wondering if karate may be of any help."



In this case, the child was a boy of 14 years old, a bit small for his age and persistent bullying by his peers had begun to take its toll.

The fact that he had an older brother who was popular, confident and a good all-round sportsman exacerbated this.

As a karate instructor, nothing inspires me more than such a cry for help from understandably concerned parents.

First as a dad myself, and second as someone having witnessed the enormous

benefits that karate offers young folks just like this.

I naturally encouraged the mum to bring her son along for a try-out. Lets call him Jeremy for the purposes of this article.

Before I continue, I should add that in my experience, karate clubs generally consist of like-minded individuals who are usually pretty friendly.

In fact, my current club at [Dee Why](#) on Sydney's Northern Beaches comprises a particularly warm, caring and decent bunch of people.

New people are greeted with smiles, handshakes and introductions all round and one of the senior students will typically take them under their wing.

The visitor is formally introduced to the class when we all 'bow in', receives a clap which is then repeated at the end of the class, simply for 'surviving the ordeal!'

This has a very positive effect on young and often shy folks like Jeremy, who do not know what to expect and feel a bit out of their depth. Especially since most of the class comprises adults.

First impressions are lasting and projecting an unthreatening and friendly environment is important to fostering a positive mindset for newcomers, irrespective of age.

Observing Jeremy that first night, I saw a lad whose body

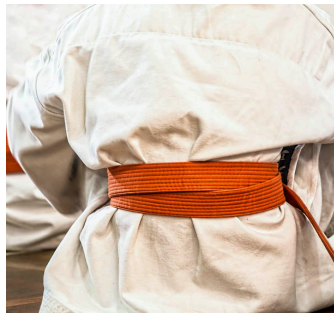
language spoke volumes on how he was feeling inside.

His head was tilted slightly down, eyes averted, shoulders drooped and generally doing a good impression of someone trying to be invisible!

The communication experts tell us that non-verbal communication, in the form of posture, eye contact, tone of voice and facial expressions, often speaks louder than words, and Jeremy's spoke volumes.

Something resonated with Jeremy that first night and he returned for a second lesson, for which he received another round of applause, and his mum duly signed him up.

Fast-forwarding a year, a substantially different picture was beginning to emerge.



Jeremy was now standing a bit taller, head held more erect with his eyes more inclined to look up and not down. His karate was improving slowly and he had successfully graded twice attaining an orange belt. The feedback from his parents was also very encouraging AND the bullying at school had tapered off!

So the question is, why exactly was this happening?

Was it simply part of his natural development, after all he had grown a bit taller, or was karate really helping and if so, how?

I am absolutely convinced that karate played a positive part in Jeremy's development, but not necessarily in the way that you might think.

It's not just that he may have picked up a few basic self-defence skills, and thus been able to fair better when confronted at school.

In any event it takes most people years of training to realistically be able to effectively apply karate-based self-defence techniques to real life situations.

This was no *Mr Miagi* and *Daniel-san* Hollywood movie.

Then what was making all the difference?

I think it's the confluence of a number of very interesting factors.

First, from the day that Jeremy joined the class as a shy teenager, his fellow-students treated him as an equal and his age and the colour of his belt was totally irrelevant.

He was simply a karateka in a meritocratic environment and while a belt/grade hierarchy exists, all this defines is at what stage of the same karate journey everyone is on.



As we always stress, the main purpose of a karate belt is to keep your trousers up!

Second, good *etiquette* is integral to karate from day one, irrespective of your grade or age. The effect on young people of being treated politely and respectfully by adults in a dojo setting can be extremely self-validating.

Third, with karate your number eventually comes up! Meaning, you eventually get put on the spot where you become the centre of attention with the eyes of the entire class upon you!

For example, you will be called upon to perform your kata (patterns) either solo or as part of a small group during a class and definitely for a grading.

A good instructor will not do this prematurely but will wait until he/she thinks the individual is ready.

Nonetheless, this can be very daunting for adults and children alike, but again if well managed, it can be an immensely confidence building exercise.

In my experience, no one has ever failed to rise to the occasion. While clearly some people are very nervous, (we ALL get nervous!) when it's over, an incredible sense of achievement and satisfaction is felt.

This stems from the knowledge that despite being nervous...**I DID IT!** ... more to the point, I have proved to myself that I am someone who is capable of doing it!

"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

Nelson Mandela

As time goes on, students not only start to feel much more comfortable performing for the class but many actually really enjoy it and go on to be enthusiastic participants at competitive events.

What's more, our members have a compulsive tendency to burst into spontaneous applause, clapping and cheering each other at the slightest provocation!

Fourth, apart from having to learn a formal syllabus, in our case the wonderful body of Shotokan Karate as taught by our founder and living karate legend, [Soke Hirokazu Kanazawa](#), physical fitness and strength is a positive by-product of the karate journey.

Many instructors, myself included, emphasise both aerobic and anaerobic

exercises (especially core) that results in improved physical conditioning all round.

The above factors seem to do wonders for everyone who trains consistently, but are especially beneficial for folks like Jeremy.

This is BEFORE we have even begun to consider any actual self-defence benefits derived from learning a martial art and most importantly gaining a better level of awareness of one's environment.

This last point refers to *ZANSHIN* (Japanese for awareness), and has been covered in a previous article, ***What Kind of Animal Are You?***

If you are a parent reading this and have a child with some of the issues that Jeremy brought to us, please take heart from this article.

There is hope and I have had several 'Jeremy's' pass through my hands over the years and even though some of them eventually gave up karate, I cannot think of one who did not walk away better for the experience.

One of the best karate journeys for any kid often occurs when a parent comes along for the ride, by training alongside their child. This is good for everyone!

Finally, of course it's not just children who may suffer from a lack of confidence or feel a bit awkward, but adults too.

Again, I have had the joy of observing people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds benefit both tangibly and intangibly from the magic of the martial arts.

The key take away message:

KARATE IS FOR EVERYONE!

Osu!

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