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TKFI

How does Karate help our children?

The practice of Karate; Empty Hand Way, enhances the overall human experience in mind, body, and spirit. Children who are fortunate enough to be exposed to Empty Hand Way are especially lucky because the lessons learned at a young age tend to be internalized and carried with them throughout life. Thus, making the job of the teacher sacred and the oversight of our youth a serious endeavor not to be taken lightly. A Sensei must have the knowledge and spirit to share the art purposefully, keeping alive the rich history, traditions and impeccable form. There are so many ways children benefit from karate; here is my attempt to outline the most important.

The structure of the Karate practice, the dojo, instructors, fellow students, the elite training and repetitive practice gives each student a sense of belonging. Experiences bigger than themselves take root and sets the platform to develop collective thought, cohesive interaction that houses purpose, a mindset of respect, protection and care. This type of character building is very powerful on multiple levels during the formative years. It fosters trust, cooperation, competitive thinking, compassion, and the spirit of hard work. This then lends itself to feelings of joy from accomplishments and sometimes sadness from failure. Either way the lessons are bountiful. It is important to mention our Karate code. This code holds everyone to a high standard which again brings about a sense of belonging to a special structured unit we are all required adhere to. During formative years these building blocks mold character and create a solid foundation with a box of useful tools each child can carry with them forever.

The essence of the Empty Hand Way is much more difficult to define because it hunkers down deep within the soul of Karate. For most younger kids the connection to the center is in their spirit of first beginning; their wonder and enthusiasm to accomplish the tasks that lay in front of them. Children, on some subliminal level, pick up on the essence through their instructors but I am not sure that the "Karate Spirit" is recognized by the littles right out of the gate. In my observation this piece starts to shine after a student matures and has some level of accomplishment moving up in rank. Enlightenment of Empty Hand Way reveals itself through the eyes, mannerisms, and poise of the student. Noticeably the student takes the practice inward. Greater attention is paid to responsibilities of leadership, listening, studying, refining movement, control, focus, breathing, relaxing, timing, and to their spirit. When the body starts to cooperate, and foundations settle, then does the essence or soul of the Empty Hand Way begin to bubble to the surface. This is life changing for young adults. This means students have reached a point in training where they have fertile ground to work with and grow from within themselves. Their survival is solely up to them. Now life skills such as independent choices, free will, hard work, loss, gain, critical thinking, hierarchy, value, community and a renewed sense of self come into play on and off the mat. This is a time when they are able recognize the cost

verses profit. The price paid in sweat for the gain in growth, a sense of accomplishment. Another valuable life lesson.

Children's minds are like sponges, and most are vulnerable, so we need to represent the practice thoughtfully and with great care. Teachers have a heightened responsibility, no matter the level, to hold themselves to pure standards when passing down what they have learned from Empty Hand Way. Karate students must always remember the student is also the teacher at every level. Someone is always watching, picking up on the tiniest of movement or behavior which is why it is critical to be a good example or teacher. Remember grasshopper; as teacher you are also student; as student you are also teacher.

Karate is a lifelong practice, a way of life. Lessons learned from the Empty Hand Way are rich and all-consuming. The spirit of first beginning, if fostered with care, changes the trajectory of children's lives. Building stronger kids spills over building stronger families which again overflows fostering stronger communities.