

How & Why Children Benefit from Judo



by

Mark Lonsdale August 8, 2012

*“Winning a championship is a temporary accomplishment
– being a better person is for life”*

More important than just building a better athlete, sports should build a better person. Judo in particular, develops discipline, manners, punctuality, strength, stamina, tenacity, toughness and confidence – all character traits that are essential to success and respected by society. Society also respects a person who wins with humility and loses with grace.

One of the unique aspects of judo training is the respect for others that is taught and required in the dojo. In time, through judo, this respect grows into a heightened level of self-confidence and discipline. For the parents of a rambunctious 6 or 8 year old, this cultivated respect and discipline can appear “heaven sent.” As a result, very rarely does one find a junior judoka who is poorly behaved or disrespectful to adults.

While judo is a martial art, and therefore a combat sport, the fighting that children do in the dojo is actually a form of preparation for life’s many challenges. In life, as in judo, we do not always win. So doing *randori*, and competing within the rules, teaches children persistence, resolve and perseverance. They also learn that it is not winning that is always important, but the time and effort dedicated to the training, and finding the courage to compete, that separates the judoka from others.

In its simplest form, character building in judo comes from the ability to be thrown on the mat, and then to get back up and keep fighting. This determination and toughness should never be under valued. The first step towards success, in any endeavour, is to learn the lesson taught by Kyuzo *Mifune* – “seven times down, eight times up.” Or as John Wayne would have put it, “You need to dust yourself off, Pilgrim, and get back on that horse.”

Junior judoka also learn the lesson of responsibility, or more specifically, taking responsibility for one’s own success or failure. They learn that if they want to succeed in grading, promotion or competition, they must turn up for class, pay attention to Sensei, learn their techniques, and then apply them in *randori*. Failure, on the other hand, can be directly attributed to how little effort they put into their lessons and training. And since children like to have fun, they also learn how much fun it is to succeed in games, pass a belt promotion, or win in *shiai*. In time they learn that the medals and trophies are just the icing on the cake. It is the peer acceptance and respect in the dojo that is more important. Recognition and a pat on the back from stern-faced Sensei are more valued and last much longer than a coloured ribbon.

There is also the self defense aspect of judo. With all the weirdoes, stalkers, crazies, and bullies out there, parents constantly worry about their children. But in judo, children gain fitness, strength, stamina, balance, agility and awareness. *Randori* and competition also develop a rough and tumble level of self-confidence that allows even junior judoka to identify a threat and react appropriately (provided the judo training has been supplemented with sage parental advice).

To conclude, judo teaches many life lessons and develops strong character traits that will serve children through their difficult teen years and into adulthood. These virtues may seem to go well beyond what is practiced in the dojo, but in reality, this is exactly what Professor Jigoro Kano intended when he created Kodokan Judo. *Jita-kyoei*, mutual welfare and benefit, is one of the most important maxims in judo, and exemplifies the greater value of judo training. *Jika no kansei*, strive for perfection, is another significant motto, provided one understands that we strive for personal perfection so that we may better help others.

“The man who is at the peak of his success and the man who has just failed are in exactly the same position. Each must decide what he will do next.”- Jigoro Kano



Bipolar 7-year-old Benefits from Judo

My bipolar son used to be a very angry little boy. Judo has played an important role in his behavior modification helping him to gain confidence, developing his social skills, and teaching him how to control and appropriately release his aggression. Judo is most certainly good for my special kid.

Bipolar disorder is a condition which may manifest itself as depression or mania in adults. This condition often looks different in children. Bipolar children can be silly to the extreme. Rather than becoming listless and depressed, bipolar children may turn extreme sadness into anger. My son's youthful efforts to contain his anger created such tension inside of him, that he seemed always ready to explode – and frequently did. We enrolled him in judo 12 months ago in hopes that judo would help. It certainly has. The first help came from the pride my son felt after facing opponents in competition.

Depressed children often have low self-esteem and little self-confidence. Judo builds self-confidence. When my son fought, lost three times and got up to fight again, eventually placing in that first tournament, he was so proud. I think he called every relative and showed that 3rd place trophy to every neighbor, the mail carrier and the entire population of Stater Brothers that very afternoon! The trophy frequently accompanied him to school as a reminder of a job well done. Because Judo competitions match kids by ability, age and size, there are frequently just a handful of equally matched children competing against each other in any given division. This greatly ups the odds of successful throws and escapes, while it significantly decreases the potential anxiety. (How many times have your kids anxiously participated in a team sport in which the opponent's age may be the same, but their skill level and body mass was double or triple that of your player? Judo is challenging but far less intimidating!) Dojo buddies shout encouragements and applaud good moves during competition, so every kid feels the success of their efforts. This self-esteem earned through Judo competitions is powerful. The camaraderie within the dojo is another powerful force that helps my son.

Understandably, bipolar children sometimes have trouble making friends because of their mood swings. Judo levels the field. In Judo class everybody is your partner at one time or another and you change partners often. No one is allowed to exclude. All are taught to assist in each other's learning. (One young green belt even volunteered to meet my son before class a couple of times to help him feel comfortable about leading warm-up exercises for his class.) As you advance in rank, you are given more responsibilities to teach and to lead, which contributes to that feeling of being an important part of the group. My son feels safe, accepted and purposeful in his dojo. He enjoys coming to class because he has friends to spar with.

The most marvelous improvement brought about by judo has been the release of tension in my son through randori. My little boy, the one who used to yank doors off their hinges and cry inconsolably after deliberately breaking his favorite toy in a rage, would giggle with delight as he wrestled on the mat. With the skills learned over this year, he has engaged in more intense battles, but amazingly my little guy still smiles. He has also learned to relax! Judo has been significant in my son learning to manage his bipolar disorder. Judo will continue being an important part of his coping strategy.