

Imagine an activity that teaches concentration, respect and good sportsmanship, all while giving your child a healthy dose of exercise. Nikki Yazochi discovers that martial arts develop all these skills, and more.

karate kids

My son Max and I first discovered hoshin jutsu when we watched a demonstration at our local market day. Max, aged four at the time, was fascinated with this variation of the Japanese martial art jujitsu and afterwards didn't stop talking about it. I took him to a class a week later and haven't looked back. His confidence, manners and coordination have all improved in the five months he's been going. He's even been awarded a patch for being 'stranger danger' aware and has progressed a grade to a red belt. He just loves it, and needless to say, so do my husband and I.

Finding a style to suit you

"Before looking for a martial arts school you need to assess why you want your child to study self-defence," says Rose Smith, creator of hoshin jutsu, a style she developed in Australia 14 years ago. "Martial arts are all about effort and discipline. It's still fun, but it's really a long-term commitment. The ultimate

goal is to get your black belt, and this isn't something you can complete in a school year, or even in three.

"You also need to assess if your child is ready emotionally and if you're ready to give them the support they will need, otherwise they'll just want to drop out as soon as it becomes challenging," she says.

"Choose a style suited to your child's temperament," says Smith. "Highly competitive kids may learn more from a non-competitive style, where they don't have pressure on them to win all the time, and nervous kids may be frightened in a class that is highly competitive.

"There are so many different variations on martial arts styles. A good guide is to watch what the instructor is focused on, then decide if that's the style you want for your child," she says.

What are the benefits?

Learning martial arts makes kids feel safe and confident. "If kids learn to fight, they're not afraid all the time," says Smith. "In the case of boys, fear makes them aggressive, so if they know how to fight, they don't need to get involved in them to prove themselves."

Students also feel confident to stand up to peer pressure and learn about being true to their own beliefs. When faced with bullies, confident kids can use their words to combat the situation, as well as defend themselves if attacked. Martial arts can even help a 'bully' by teaching them to respect others.

A good class can help to develop life skills including: loyalty, honour, good sportsmanship, manners, truthfulness, integrity and responsibility.

Martial arts for kids

"All martial arts for children should be non-contact initially," says Smith. "As they progress it becomes necessary to actually have physical contact with one another, but this should always be safe, controlled and with the right instructor-to-student ratio to ensure there is proper supervision. If a child doesn't want to compete or fight, there should be absolutely no pressure to do so."

Below is a basic guide to the martial arts styles most suited to kids:

Hoshin jutsu Teaches proper rolling and break-falling skills to help kids protect themselves. They also learn coordination, responsibility, self-esteem and trustworthiness. "Even though most martial arts styles will take kids from school age, children can start hoshin from the age of three," says Instructor Smith. "It's the younger kids who are far more open to learning the good citizenship skills."

Jujitsu Also known as a 'grappling' style that involves striking, kicking, throwing and groundwork. Children learn how to fall, roll and how to fight on the ground. Jujitsu is a well-rounded style that covers many aspects of self-defence, but does not have competitions.

Judo Is a 'throwing' style where sweeps and throws are used to upset the balance of the attacker. It focuses on rolling, break-falling, locks and holds. This style has highly competitive aspects and students can enter competitions to win prizes.

Karate and taekwon do These are known as "stand up" styles and are by far the most popular. They use kicking, open-handed striking, punching and blocking as their basic focus. Students of these styles can enter competitions to win prizes.

Kung-fu Another popular "stand up" style that uses kicking, punching and blocking as the basic focus. Kung-fu is the style of martial art usually seen in movies, such as the Jackie Chan films, and also *Kill Bill*, *The Matrix* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. This style has a lot of wonderful traditions, including the dragon dancers and drumming that you see at Chinese New Year celebrations.



Instructor Morgan Flook shows the younger hoshin jutsu students what years of martial arts training can achieve.

"Concentration skills are also developed, in particular, listening and carrying out instruction, and using initiative to problem solve," says Smith.

As the fitness required in martial arts is quite intense, over time the students' cardiovascular endurance, flexibility, balance, strength and overall energy levels are generally improved. It's also great for left- and right-brain coordination.

Finally, a good martial art school can become a second home, and the kids they train with can become like a second family. The relationships formed between the students and their teacher can last a lifetime and have a positive impact on a child's life.

Through the ages

"Kids can start younger, but I think five is a good age for most children to start in the martial arts," says Howard Quick, children's development director of the Australian Ju-Jitsu Association. There's a benefit in martial arts for all age groups, starting with preschoolers on:

Kindy kids: "Martial arts helps younger kids gain confidence. This is advantageous when they're separated from their parents for any length of time, such as when they attend school," he says. "Children also gain a better awareness of, and are more adept at using, both the left and right sides of their body. If this is introduced when they're young, it carries over into their teens and adulthood."

School kids: "Martial arts training acts as an equaliser," says Quick. "It helps to settle kids who are a little boisterous. And for kids who are shy, the training gives them the courage to come out of their



shell. They'll also gain confidence without being pretentious. Usually, when a martial art student is asked to get up in front of a large group and perform a particular task/technique, they don't hesitate. This has a carry-over effect in their schooling and helps in extracurricular activities such as sports."

High school kids: "Teenagers generally have a pretty hard time," says Quick. "They're expected to be more responsible for their actions, and unless they're taught responsibility, they have a tough time dealing with it."

"Martial arts help to guide teenagers in the right direction. They learn what they used to get away with as kids is no longer overlooked or acceptable."

What to look for in a school

Parents should first go along to a martial art class (without their child) to watch how the instructor teaches. Check there is a black belt instructing the class, or at least supervising at all times. It's important that every movement being taught should be properly explained and the students understand it before continuing. Children under 12 years old should not be learning any kind of head winding or serious throws. Finally, check if the teacher is



Instructor Rose Smith with some of her hoshin jutsu "modern warriors".

engaging, friendly and able to handle several different levels of ability in the one class at the same time.

A warrior's rules to discipline

In her book *The Hoshin Book of Manners for the Modern Warrior* (Independent Spirit, 2005), Smith explains the syllabus she created for her students, who she calls her 'modern warriors', as they fight against rudeness, apathy and lack of discipline. "When children are complimented on their excellent behaviour and manners, it reinforces that you get a lot further with those skills than you do with tantrums and demands," says Smith. Here, she shares her top ten discipline tips:

1 Work out what the rules are. Before you start any discipline program, you need to set boundaries. Work out what the rules are with the whole family, write them down and pin them up where you can see them. Everyone in the family must stick to them.

2 Be consistent. Each time you're not consistent with enforcing the rules, you set yourself back.

3 Be mindful of context. Sometimes kids need to be kids and that's okay. There are times when they need to get their 'wiggles and jiggles' out, so there are always exceptions to the rules, but you have to explain them: "You're not usually allowed to eat in front of the television,

but as you're sick you can have your toast while watching your favourite show."

4 Watch what you say. Mind your language, as your child will mimic everything you say and do. If you don't speak kindly or respectfully to your child, don't expect them to speak kindly or respectfully back.

5 Apologise when you're wrong. Don't be afraid to say sorry if you know you're wrong. It sets a good example.

6 Use 'and' not 'but'. Using 'but' negates what you're saying and can cause anguish. Think, "I love you, but..."

7 Give genuine praise. When your child gets it right or does something good, praise them. You don't need to give them gifts. They're not buying your praise.

8 Don't lose your temper. If you do, apologise, but don't negate it by stating that you're still angry.

9 Be a good sport. Learning to hear the word 'no' without having a meltdown, learning to win or not win and understanding things don't always go our way. Teach your child how to meet the highs and lows of life with a calm acceptance. It's a genuine gift.

10 Examine your own behaviour. You can't expect kids to learn great behaviour and manners if yours aren't up to scratch. **AP**

For more information on the program, visit www.modernmanners.com.au.

locating a dojo near you

Check with your local community centre or contact:

Martial Arts Industry Association: www.maia.com.au or 02 8116 9822

Hoshin Jutsu: www.hoshin.com.au

Australian Ju-Jitsu Federation: www.ajja.org

Australian Kung-Fu Federation: www.akwf.com or 02 8116 9822

Australian Karate Federation: www.akf.com.au or 07 3300