

try it out



Little warriors

The martial art of hoshin jutsu has much to teach children, as **Nikki Yazxhi** and her son discover.

I first discovered the martial art hoshin jutsu while looking through all the activity timetables and pamphlets at our local community centre. I went online to do a bit more research and the more I found out about it, the more I liked it – and so does my four-and-half-year-old son, Max.

After seeing a demonstration at our community's annual market day, Max was really keen to become a hoshin "warrior". So the next week we signed up for the littlies class, Snap Dragons. The curriculum for his age group includes stranger awareness, dealing with bullies, using words instead of fists, falling and rolling skills to minimise accidents, concentration skills and, most importantly, good citizenship skills, which covers manners, good sportsmanship, kindness, respect for others and learning to take "no" gracefully.

Sensei Rose Smith and Sempai Robert McNaught teach the classes. (In Japanese, the word "sensei" means teacher, while "sempai", roughly translated, means mentor). They both have a great rapport with the kids and you can feel the mutual respect and admiration between the teachers and students. Smith co-founded hoshin jutsu in Australia and is the principal of the Avalon, Sydney centre (or "dojo", meaning "place of the way" or place of training.)

Don't get me wrong; it's not all lovey-dovey. Smith is tough. The kids have heaps of fun, but there's absolutely no mucking about in class. If you do – or if you're not wearing your uniform or you forget your water bottle – there's a 10-push-up punishment. Every warrior is taught to be responsible for his or her own belongings.

Warriors must also study their Hoshin Book Of Manners For The Modern Warrior, which Smith wrote. The book covers everything about manners, behaviour and the kind of rules that hoshin warriors should follow. The kids are tested in class and there is a star award system. After reading it to Max for a couple of weeks, he started asking to be excused from the table after dinner and taking his plate up to the sink for the first time. My husband and I were blown away.

But hoshin isn't just about manners; it's also very physical. Push-ups, sit-ups, stretching, warrior poses, rolling. In other words, it's a full-on workout, and my son has the best night's sleep after a class. Another huge plus is that, unlike many children's physical activities,

there's no overt competitiveness and every kid works at his or her own level. They all support and encourage each other.

Good citizens

"Children can start hoshin when they turn three years old," says Smith. "Older children pick up the complicated techniques more easily, but younger children are far more open to learning all the good citizenship skills without feeling it's 'uncool'."

"Children want to feel useful and important," adds Smith. "Being part of a group makes them feel part of the greater community. In my experience, they want to know how they can help."

She adds that learning self-defence skills makes children feel safe and confident, without needing to go into fights to show how tough they are. "They feel confident enough to stand up to peer pressure and they learn about being true to their own beliefs," she says. "When kids are complimented on their behaviour and manners, it reinforces that you get a lot further with those skills than you do with tantrums and demands."

Regaining control

"Parents learn how to regain control of their kids," says Smith. "For many, it seems easier to give in to incessant nagging and tantrums just to get five minutes' peace, but this brings teenage years full of fighting and drama."

The centre also has an eight-week manners program, where the behaviour and attitude of both the parent and the child is addressed. Smith says parents usually report that there is a big improvement in their child's behaviour, but she says, "A lot of it comes from the parent actually realising that it's okay to expect – and demand – good behaviour all the time."

Max has only been doing hoshin for a couple of months and he's really embracing everything he's being taught. He remembers his manners; he's received an "awesome effort" award for passing a "stranger danger" test in class; and he's progressed from a white belt to a red belt at his first ever grading. We're so proud of our little warrior and, better still, Max is proud of himself.

As a parent, I wholeheartedly recommend hoshin jutsu. Happy kids, happy parents – what more could you ask for?

Children want to feel useful and important... they just want to know how they can help.

Children's classes

! Snap Dragons

This class is for three- to four-year-olds. The children learn basic motor skills, balance and concentration, stranger danger, child safety and respect for others. Parental participation is a requirement of this course. The younger children are given more licence than the older kids, as they don't yet have the same fine and gross motor skills.

! Little Dragons

This is the beginner group. They concentrate on meditation, kicking, falling, rolling and self-defence. More advanced child safety skills are taught, along with more complex techniques for coping with bullying and defence situations.

! Golden Dragons

This group are in training for senior classes and they learn the adult syllabus as much as is appropriate for their age. This includes all aspects of the art, as well as meditation, respect for self and others and dojo etiquette. This is the intermediate level, where they also study first aid and attend a leadership program. They will also attend the beginner class as a "kohai" (teacher's helper) and assist with teaching the beginners.

! Fire Dragons

This group is for early to mid teens. These students are preparing to move up to full adult classes. Before a student may attain adult red belt, they attend Teen Camp, a special weekend away to celebrate and recognise their entry into the adult world.

For more information and details of classes in your state call (02) 8004 2048 or visit www.hoshin.com.au