

My Experience with Children and Taekwon-Do

Ms Rose Cherrington

Children are the most challenging students for Taekwon-Do instructors, but can also be the most rewarding. They are our future and the next generation of instructors. It is our responsibility to pass on our knowledge to them so that Taekwon-Do will continue into the future.

I started teaching Taekwon-Do while I was in the police force stationed at Porirua. My colleagues convinced me to start a club as they wanted to join. But working rosters and living busy lifestyles meant that my fellow police men were not reliable students, so the clubs focus soon became on the children who had also signed up. Once you get a couple of kids, they soon tell their friends and very quickly the club became very large. With the increase of children the adults soon disappeared, and as I had work commitments too I chose to only teach one class, which became the beginning of my career as a children's instructor.

I soon discovered that teaching children was quite different from teaching adults, and learnt a lot in my first years of instructing by way of trial and error. I also discovered that certain teaching methods may work for some children and not for others, so different teaching methods needed to be used. Concentration spans were also very short and most children had lost their focus after one hour.

A lot of the children in my club at this time came from troubled families, this I knew from the line of work I was in. There was an occasion when I visited a family, as they had no phone, and the dad was in the lounge smoking pot with his mates. You can imagine the panic when they saw me at the door, as they knew what profession of work I was in. But I was visiting as a Taekwon-do instructor and not a police woman, once they realised this I was able to develop a good rapport with the families.

These children were all very talented and able but lacked commitment and the desire to work hard. They would often quit when the going got tough. They also didn't have parents encouraging and supporting them. These children were very rewarding to work with but also the most disheartening. A lot of people think it is not a good idea to teach a martial art to these type of children but the children who are of the offending type do not make it in Taekwon-Do as they lack the commitment and ability to work hard. The ones that do make it through find another focus and become a better person. This was when I saw how beneficial Taekwon-do was to children and my focus continued in teaching children.

Due to illness I had to leave the police force and returned to my home town of Levin. As there was no one to take over my club at the time, the club closed. I thought that this was the end of my Taekwon-do career. After several major surgeries I had been out of Taekwon-do for approximately two years. My children were aged four and two, and I wanted them to enjoy Taekwon-do as I had done. I too was itching to get back into it, so went along to Mr Salton's club. At the time Mr Salton's club did not teach children under ten years old, but he was happy for me to train with the kids hanging around. Anyone who has young children will know that training with

your two and four year old running around is a bit of a mission impossible. I really wanted my own children involved with Taekwon-do but did not want to wait until they were ten years old, and wanted them to be involved with a club. So I decided to open a children's class. Hence the opening of the Taekwon-do Cubs. I had a few friends with young children who were interested in joining so the club started with a total of 11 students.

Once again word of mouth increased the club to 20, 25, 30, 40 and eventually 50. So a few changes of venues and added classes the club was booming. An unexpected event was the participation of the parents sitting on the side line watching. A number of parents thought it looked like fun and asked to join in so the club became family orientated. Parents wanted to train with their children at the same time, so the structure of our classes changed, and as I was no longer working I was able to do more classes to accommodate the needs of our students.

We first started with a one hour class once a week. This was well suited to the younger children as anything longer was too much for them. Our age range was age four to ten years old, with the exception of my son who was two. The biggest difference with the children in this club from that of the Porirua club, was the attitude of the children and support of the parents. I found these children easier to teach and did not have so many disciplinary issues. When ever a grading or tournament came up we would have additional trainings at my house for those grading or competing. These sessions also converted into social occasions and we all became part of the Taekwon-do family.

The class was focused on teaching children age between four and ten, so the parents who participated had agreed and understood that the focus was on teaching the children. As time went by, the adults were enjoying training and more parents became interested. It is very difficult to teach young children and adults at the same time and cater for each of their needs, so I added an extra session per week in order to cater for the adults. So Monday's session was still focused on the children and parents were able to train alongside. The earlier time was also aimed at the younger children, being 4pm to 5pm. Later sessions mean the children are too tired before they have even started. Friday's class was adult focused with a later time and my commitment to teaching the adults. Children who were green belt or above were allowed to attend this class on the understanding it is adult focused. This suited well as at green belt level one session a week was not enough time to teach the whole syllabus. We still maintained additional weekend trainings as needed.

Being a new club, I did not have many senior members, so as the club grew and the children climbed the ranks, it became more difficult to meet each persons needs. It is very difficult to teach young children who are at blue belt level and teach white belts at the same time. If you cater to the white belts needs, then the blue belts become bored and restless. If you cater to the blue belts needs then the white belts become stressed as it is too hard and they may not come back. You cannot use the higher ranked children to teach new white belts so separating the class was impossible.

We now have a white belt class, which goes from 4pm to 5pm and includes yellow stripes. Coloured belts start at 5pm and finish 6.30pm. Again this is children focused for both of these classes and applies only to them. This made teaching for me much easier. I was able to meet the

white belts needs and could take on new students at any time of the year. Children did not have to wait till next term, or after grading before they could join. Coloured belts needs were also being met as they did not have the white belts to hold them back with having to explain everything as you go or to learn rules on behaviour. I also found that we kept a lot more white belts. Often when you get new students, a lot of them do not continue or join, but once we opened our white belt class nearly all new students joined.

Our children and adults have climbed up the ranks and we now have red belts in the club. To meet their needs I have added in a blackbelt session on Sunday afternoons, for those training for blackbelt or black belts who want to train. These sessions we have in my home gym which enables us to have a social side to our trainings.

The structure of classes is just one way to make teaching children easier. Other tips I have learnt are:

Always keep children occupied. Spend less time explaining things and more time practicing. Most children will pick things up quicker by copying you than from you explaining it to them. Once they have picked up the physical action they will then understand the verbal explanation.

Demonstrate while facing in the same direction as the students, it makes it a lot easier for the children to copy. If you are facing the student, then mirror their actions as most children do not know left from right. If you move to the left while facing a student, the student will more than likely move to the right.

If a child is having difficulty grasping a particular movement, stand behind the child, hold their fists in your hands and get the child to relax. Then do to motion with the child several times, let go and see if the child continues correctly. (Be aware of the child's personal space and appropriate touching. This works best with the younger child)

Where possible give single word explanations. Break movements up in order to do this eg. Cross, block etc.

Focus on one thing at a time eg. Get the student crossing the hands before a block, once they have the idea of crossing the hands then focus on which way around the hands should be.

Give lots of praise, never give negative comments. If correction is needed first praise something they did well. It may only be something as simple as 'I can see you are trying really hard', which sometimes a child is but still fails to grasp a particular technique.

When teaching a new technique, demonstrate once, then break the movement up and demonstrate each stage (once and facing the same direction). Then get the children to copy each stage with you. Practise each stage with the children and complete the movement several times. Stop and continue to call each stage as you watch the children and correct anyone needing help. Once the children have mastered each stage then practice in one motion. Most children will not mind practicing a movement over and over as long as they are actually doing it and you are not telling them how to do it.

When you sense the children are losing interest, move onto something else.

When teaching saju maki and saju jirigi, place a flat fridge magnet under the opposite foot. This foot stays on the magnet (but can turn on the spot). This helps the child identify which foot moves.

Don't spend too long on any one topic. Structure your class to include as many different aspects of training. This will keep them interested and motivated. Things that the children find boring can be placed in between things they find fun. A typical one hour white belt class for me would consist of, warm up/stretch, basic movements (one hand and one foot), pad work, pattern work, special technique (jumping front snap kick). Each week will include something different. No training session is the same.

Avoid having children standing in lines waiting for a turn at something.

Teaching children is a challenge within itself. Experience goes a long way and being a parent also helps. Instructors who do not have children tend to be less tolerant, I know I was. Children are like sponges, they absorb everything. A child will learn a new pattern just by watching someone else do it. Often my students know their new patterns before I have taught it to them simply from having watched others do it. The techniques may not be correct but the general movements are their. An adult will stress and want everything perfect whereas the child will just do it and not care.

If a child is failing to progress in a class then it is usually because of either, they are not interested and can't be bothered, they need more practice, they think they are doing it correctly, or they fail to understand the given instructions. With the exception of the ones who cannot be bothered, I make it a personal challenge to insure a child understands my teaching methods and progresses in my class.

Taekwon-do is a big part of who I am, I hope to pass this on to my children and students so that they can enjoy and benefit as I have done.