

Self Defence - What is it?

By Mark Turner

Over my years of attending TaeKwon-Do, I have become increasingly more aware of the problems and issues regarding the attracting and retaining of teenage students to this sport. How do we get teenagers to join TaeKwon-Do and when we're successful, how do we ensure that they stick with it? In order to address these questions we need to understand how teenagers think and the reasons behind their actions.

Teenagers are young people who are at the special age of finding and making their own way in the world. They believe they can make their own decisions and no longer need to be controlled by their parents and although they appear to know what they want, they're often uncertain on their direction and how to achieve their goals. Teenagers' lives largely revolve around themselves with very few major adult responsibilities. Often their time is divided between school, friends and other leisurely activities. They spend a lot of time socializing, often attending social events (including sporting events) and communicating through varying electronic methods such as texting, bebo, facebook and on-line games to name a few.

Let us discuss some of the reasoning of typical teenagers who are considering a sporting/martial art commitment.

Why would they join TaeKwon-Do?

- They have a friend or associate already participating in TaeKwon-Do and have been encouraged by the practitioner who has spouted the virtues and advantages of attending classes, to participate.
- They admire and aspire to be like a TaeKwon-Do practitioner of this art that they know or have observed and are impressed by. (This is how I was first introduced to the art - whilst attending a public demonstration.)
- They may have acquired an interest while playing online games and/or watching movies. This may have made them want to learn the skills in order to gain social status amongst their peers, or rather in teenage layman terms "to be cool".
- They feel they need to learn how to fight or defend themselves as a result of some form of bullying or intimidation from fellow teenagers.
- Some out-of-condition teenagers may want to gain fitness and improve their overall well-being and see TaeKwon-Do as an avenue for doing so, whilst at the same time gaining some practical skills as well.

- There are some teenagers who seek a strong male role model in the form of a TaeKwon-Do coach or instructor who they become loyal to. That person is someone whose practice they usually deeply respect.

On the negative side, why are teenagers reluctant to join TaeKwon-Do and attend the training classes?

- It is likely that the biggest obstruction would be the fear of embarrassment of not performing and learning the aspects of TaeKwon-Do properly and immediately. Although the rest of the class would already have passed through this phase, the new student is likely to feel self-conscious and lack a lot of confidence when performing what for other students would be basic, routine TaeKwon-Do skills and actions.

- Various forms of peer pressure come into play as to whether a potential student will commit to TaeKwon-Do and a healthy way of life or join his peers in other more seemingly exciting pastimes.

- Transportation would be a key factor especially in the earlier teenage years even though the individual is effectively independent and making decisions such as attending TaeKwon-Do classes. The lack of a driver's license and personal transport would inhibit their ability to attend trainings without the assistance of their parents, thus seemingly undermining their independence.

- Another factor that could play a big part in whether a teenager commits to TaeKwon-Do is his/her financial situation. Participating in a sport that has certain financial requirements can often place strain on the teenager and his/her family, which may in some situations actually deter them from joining the sport.

So now knowing some of the reasons why potential students may wish to join TaeKwon-Do and why they may decide against it, I will expand on the positives and propose solutions for the negatives.

Getting them in the door:

ITF NZ statistics for 2008 demonstrate that we *do* have the ability to attract teenagers, especially in their early teenage years. This group is in the optimum position to join as they are generally fit, able to learn easily and are well supported by their parents. However, there are huge numbers of teenagers yet to be exposed to TaeKwon-Do. How can we reach them?

Existing TaeKwon-Do members should take every opportunity to promote the organisation and the merits of the TaeKwon-Do way. As mentioned before, people become aware of TaeKwon-Do through friends and associates.

The attractions for a teenager may include the

- mental and physical fitness and therefore general well-being achieved through the continuous training programmes.

- self-defense element which unfortunately is a worthy requirement in today's society.

- self-respect gained which can reduce and eliminate the occurrence of bullying, as confident teenagers are less likely to become the targets and victims of bullies.

- sporting element of TaeKwon-Do which can involve numerous tournaments where you can get in a ring and fight in a controlled and relatively safe environment. This is a great draw especially for young males with a lot of testosterone flowing through their veins – it gives them the opportunity to express their aggression (felt often during their teenage years) in a controlled fashion.

Different aspects of the art can be accentuated and are dependent on the situation of the interested teenager. For example, the self-defense element should be promoted to a potential student who has an issue with bullying whereas the health aspect should be put forward for someone wishing to lose weight and get fit.

Clubs need to be proactive when attending galas and events where demonstrations can be performed to promote the club and organisation. Having attended several of these events myself, I can say there is generally a high level of interest from teenagers and their parents as they witness techniques of self defense and other “cool” demonstrations such as board-breaking and high flying kicks. Apart from the time commitment, little is required to perform a very entertaining show. Public participation in displays such as holding pads and board-breaking always heightens interest.

A way to help a teenager overcome their fear of embarrassment may be to have a “Parent/Child” night or to have a student “Bring a Friend Along” night or maybe even to encourage teenagers to join in pairs. In this way they will not be alone in their first attempt at TaeKwon-Do.

Teenagers who are drawn to TaeKwon-Do due to movies and games will probably seek out and join the first martial arts club they come across, whatever the code, and will probably be enticed in by word of mouth or displays/demonstrations where they observe “cool” moves. Therefore the ITFNZ name needs to be out there in plain view and in big bold bright letters if possible. Even though our website is extremely informative, a potential teenage student conducting a general New Zealand search for martial arts on sites such as Google, will find that “Kiaido Ryu Martial Arts”, followed by a New Zealand Directory for martial arts, Auckland Martial Arts Supplies, another directory, etc. are at the top of the search list. Although I could find our website in the directories, we were not an obvious choice.

The first night and keeping them interested:

The present system of providing several free trial lessons is a great start for any potential teenage student, once we have successfully got them in the door. This means they have overcome their initial fears and/or self-consciousness and/or any negative peer pressure that may have prevented them from showing an interest in TaeKwon-Do sooner. It is therefore

important that we create a comfortable environment that students are willing to return to time and time again.

Firstly, the beginner will require support and guidance while he/she learns the first basic set of TaeKwon-Do skills, practices, culture and expected behaviours. On the first night a teenage beginner would likely feel far more comfortable if they were to be assigned a club member for support to either assist or just generally encourage (preferably another teenager) them. Another idea may be to have a quick team game to introduce and include the new member.

At some point in the first few sessions, I believe that it is important that the instructor forms some relationship with the student, finding out what motivated them to join and looking to meet those needs within the programme (where appropriate) within the class's needs. The activities need to be fun yet challenging, so that the student can gain enjoyment from them, but at the same time feel that they are achieving and learning at the right pace.

I realise that repetition is a crucial factor in successfully mastering the aspects and sequenced moves of TaeKwon-Do, however in my opinion, excessive repetition at training sessions could lead to teenage students not returning due to boredom. This could be fixed by pacing the sessions so that repetitive activities are mixed with other aspects of TaeKwon-Do training. Trainings should be interesting and varied. An interested teenager wishing to further their abilities should be instructed that what they have learnt should be practiced in their own time. The main purpose for class should be for training and to check on the students' practiced aspects.

The transportation issue is tricky, especially for the younger teenagers, as not all parents can commit the time driving to and from the training sessions due to other commitments such as work or younger siblings who have different schedules to the teenager. One possible solution would be to introduce other practitioners living in a similar location to each other in an effort to start car-pooling arrangements. Another benefit to this sort of arrangement would be the support and encouragement that friends would be able to give each other if they travel to and from trainings together, especially when they become dependent on one another for transport. It also gives them a chance to debrief afterwards and to analyse trainings and advice given to them by instructors.

Expenses is another difficult issue to resolve. Providing suggestions as to where secondhand doboks and equipment can be purchased will ensure that informed decisions are made especially when spending money on sporting equipment is limited. Also, providing guidance and advice on the type of equipment that will be required and for what purposes well in advance will go a long way in ensuring parents and/or teenagers can budget and be prepared for any expenses related to TaeKwon-Do. If possible, a collection of old equipment could be made available for club training nights as and when required. Workshops on fundraising methods, techniques and options could also assist in relieving some financial pressure.

When properly treated, a teenage student will quickly realise a sense of pride and belonging with his newfound friends and gain respect for his seniors and their abilities. Although teenage students will rarely admit this, they do tend to search for boundaries and discipline. The tenants and the oath of TaeKwon-Do which are taught as part of the first white belt theory is an excellent method of instilling pride in themselves, their club and the organisation. I feel the oath and tenants should be recited at the beginning of class as part of every training session. Traditions are important in establishing culture, creating a sense of belonging and bringing forth a sense of pride in all who wish to abide by and follow them.

No student should ever be intentionally embarrassed or made to feel incompetent, particularly in their first few months of training. This does not mean they should be "babied" or be "allowed"

to perform at unsatisfactory standards. However, in the right environment most teenage athletes will enjoy a good hard physical training and be able to take constructive criticism on board.

Instructors should be aware and understand the reasons for individuals joining the club and the goals that they wish to achieve through trainings and tournaments. This will enable the teenage student to be directed to an area of competition that may best suit their abilities. This will allow students to focus on and potentially excel in one area of TaeKwon-Do which will give them a sense of achievement and promote self-confidence.

Statistics from ITFNZ over the past three years show an average attrition rate of almost 34%. I believe that if we attended to new students in the ways suggested above, we may well improve our ability to retain those students in the sport of TaeKwon-Do.

Stopping the loss of long-time TaeKwon-Do teenage participants

We have covered attracting and holding on to newly-joined TaeKwon-Do teenage students, but what about all higher-ranked teenage students? Why would a black belt athlete leave the sport of TaeKwon-Do? This is a difficult question to answer. There could be lots of contributing factors.

Some teenagers want a new challenge, some want to focus on their studies, some want to focus on more mainstream sports...there are lots of possible reasons.

One of the major reasons that I think for teenage black belt athletes leaving the sport is that many of them would set the individual goal of gaining a black belt and once they've achieved this, they have to decide whether they want to try out something new or continue with more of the same. A lot of teenagers then choose to move on...

For the more successful teenagers the draw of the international competitions, the almost continual and strenuous extra training schedule and the chance to represent New Zealand and therefore possibly medal at an international level, has given new goals to many and increased the camaraderie and pride amongst the teenage TaeKwon-Do athletes.

Clearly there are special needs associated with teenagers when it comes to TaeKwon-Do, which explains our difficulty in both enlisting and retaining them. They are different in terms of their life stage (exploring all these different avenues), their attitudes, their needs and what type of activities hold their attention. However, after addressing the whys and the hows of these differences, I hope that my explanations will provide some insights into teenagers and that my ideas may incite a little action or encourage a few variances in our day-to-day club management. If we are able to be flexible, embrace new ideas and become as inclusive as possible with our teenagers, I believe we may well improve our ability to retain them. And that's got to be great for both the teenagers and the organisation!