

RAMBLINGS OF A THIRD DAN

Teaching Kids

When I was a younger and a slightly more impatient person, I had decided that I would never teach Taekwon-Do to kids. Back then I was focused on my own training or assisting adults and seniors who were self-motivated and already quite capable. I found that helping teach children was hard work. I felt like it took a lot more time and effort and I often felt that they were too slow to understand new concepts. Now that I'm not so young and have a bit more patience, I can see the problem was with how I approached instructing kids, the order I taught things and my limited understanding of how they think and act.

In 2007 when I took over the Glenfield Taekwon-Do club, the way I ran the club was still using the same thought process of thinking about my own training and only wanting to work with capable adults. I did this by making the sessions very physically demanding and having all the students do all the same activities. My instructing motto was simple "keep up or miss out".

Subsequently the club was very small with around 20 students in total. This is because people needed to be fit and committed to their training from when they walked in the door, so most new students that showed up didn't stay long. Because of this over time the club became very top heavy with black belts, red belts, and a couple of hard working junior grades. We did however maintain a high rate of "A Passes".

In 2012 when we had to move venues I had already decided to restructure the classes to accommodate new students / junior grades, also adding a kids class. At this stage in my life I was now a third degree black belt who was 28 and expecting my first born (Grace) the following month. So my thoughts about kids in general had changed a bit in the 10 years that I had been a black belt.

Once we started the kids class I learnt a lot of lessons about kids, how they think, what is important and how they comprehend information. A lot of what I had learnt was used to adapt the ways I teach Taekwon-Do, both to kids and adults. Having kids of my own and working with other children at Taekwon-Do I am always getting a better understanding of how they think, what is important to them and new ways of explaining Taekwon-Do for them to understand.

This paper explains a few of the things that I have found effective and important for teaching kids. Most of the concepts and exercises that I use for teaching kids, can easily be adapted for adults. Some of these are adaptations of items I had been taught with or seen other instructors use, some have been picked up from other sports or figured out from the tried and tested "trial and error" approach. Each of them I have found to be very useful for instructing at all levels and ages.

Routine

By Lisa Medoff

Routines help children develop self-control because they know they have to wait until a certain time to do a particular activity. A regular schedule fosters responsibility and independence because children will be able to perform more activities on their own if they have done the same activities many times before in the same environment.

Although routine is very important for young children, do not be too rigid. Children do need to learn how to be flexible and deal with minor changes. If there is an interruption to the routine, tell your child, "I know we usually do x, but today we are going to do y because (reason). Tomorrow we will go back to our usual schedule." Young children need both consistency and limits.

One thing that children rely on is "routine". Having set routines gives them a feeling of safety and comfort. Inside the routine there can be pieces of change and that's ok for them because they know that shortly it will be back to the usual. This dawned on me one day when I was at my daughters swimming class. Every week at swimming we do the same games and activities and the kids quickly get comfortable with the routine and the water. Until this sudden realisation, I had been trying to mix up every session with new ideas or ways of doing things to keep the kids busy and thinking, so they would be focused on the new exciting item and wouldn't get bored or misbehave. But then I realised that because we were always doing different items every class with no set format or repetition to the class structure, then there was no sense of achievement or mastery for the students, which actually led to an increased level of misbehaviour and lack of attention; the opposite to what I thought I was doing.

So now when planning a training session I keep this in mind and that is why the layout of the session is almost always the same and half the items are repeated every session.

1. Warm up – Every session we do pretty much the same warm up, as this helps get them into the "I'm now at Taekwon-Do" mindset.
2. Punches, blocks and basic kicks – This gives me a chance to remind them of a few key items, "cross on top" for a low block, or "Keep the leg straight" for your rising kick. Generally it is best just to repeat techniques that you have already taught them and avoid introducing new ones.
3. Activity 1 – This might be patterns, board breaking, sparring, or learning a new technique, etc.
4. Activity 2 – This might be Patterns, etc. Or usually it will be an addition to the previous activity. For example activity 1 might have been practicing a side piercing kick, so then activity 2 might be to break a board with the kick, or use it in sparring etc.
5. Stretching
6. Kicking Routine – We do the same kicking routine every class (see explanation below).
7. Game – if there is time. Games are always at the end of the session, leaving the class with having just had fun makes them want to return for the next session, also after a game their focus is on fun rather than technique, so it should be left till last.

Kicking Routine

Every class and session we perform a set kicking routine, everyone does it whether they are 4yo or 40+yo.

It is an adaption of what Master Jerzy Jedut from Poland says that their athletes do every class.

We use a Tabata Timer (A **Tabata** is a high-intensity workout protocol, for example 20 seconds of all-out exercise followed by 10 seconds of rest) it has four activities broken into a left and right, giving 8 rounds in total and it takes 3min 50sec to complete.

The techniques covered are

- 1: Turning kicks,
- 2: Side piercing kicks,
- 3: Hopping on one leg holding the other leg in a "Universal Chamber" position,
- 4: Holding the leg out in a side piercing kick position.

For the kids they must perform this routine with one hand on the wall or a chair for balance, this way they can have control over the quality of the kick and gives them a good basis of the major motor skills required to perform each technique. It also improves their kicking endurance and leg strength.



Crossing for blocks

Kids, and even some adults, have trouble with the coordination of, or concept of, crossing their arms and then moving them in a direction to block something that we say is there, but isn't. Often the crossing is incorrect, or the technique lacks any acceleration or "power".

So I have adapted a concept that Master Steve Pellow introduced to me. He used it to help me prepare for my first world champs competition where I went from 3rd place in the New Zealand Nationals to 2nd at the world champs. Now I use it to help the kids practice their blocks.

I simply called it "Hit" because everyone including small children understands "Hit" they know how to hit something or someone from a very young age, that's part of why a punch, kick or strike is much easier for them to understand and perform.

This is how I use it to practice their crossing.



For example if you want to practice crossing for an outer forearm or knifehand block, then you get them to hit a pad with side fist or knife hand side strike. Starting very simply with them standing side facing to the pad and give them the simple instructions of make an "X" with your arms and the "hand hitting the pad will be on the top".



You can use the same concept for their Inner forearm side blocks, but you change the technique they are using on the pad to a backfist strike. The "hand hitting the pad will start underneath" so that the crossing they are practicing is the same way around as you will want them to do for the block.



At this stage the practice is done in lines, with the pad holder at the front of the line to make sure the crossing is round the right way. Ensure that both sides are practiced evenly, make sure if you have two lines one line does the right side and the other side does the left, getting them to alternate lines each time. This also gets their body used to alternating from a left to a right block, like they will do later when practicing it back and forward in line work.

Once they have the crossing round the right way the next step is to get them to hit something with their block, usually a small pad or foam pool noodle, so they can get the instant feedback of if it is going to the correct place.



Again you start them off very simple, standing in their stance, arms crossed the right way round and then doing the block from there. As they progress they can then cross and block in one motion, then add in the step as well.



Having the target to hit will usually also produce that, often missing, speed in their block. However they will usually have to be reminded once they are getting used to it, to make sure they stop the block at the correct place instead of swinging right through.

Sparring

With teaching sparring to kids there are usually 2 issues. The first one is the problem of them getting carried away and hurting each other. The second one is the availability of sparring gear or usually the lack of it. Often this means that they will practice their sparring with a lot of room in between them and their opponent, where they will work with great purpose to not get near to or hit the other person. I believe this is ingraining bad habits into their training, as later on they will then need to retrain their sparring and figure out realistic distance for their techniques to be successful.

So what I have done is adapted the game of “tag” to train the correct mind set, to be used for sparring practice.

Because in tag you must make contact to “tag” the other person, just like we need to make contact in sparring to successfully score a point.

This means that they are also practicing other important aspects of sparring such as: Timing, Distance, Making the other person miss, Footwork, Deception, Blocking and covering.

It’s also a good way to implement many of the rules that are used in sparring.

How often do you see students from “sijak” just start trying to pointlessly flail at each other because they are “Sparring”? By training it this way and because they are thinking “tag” instead of “hit”, they have better control over their movements usually making them faster and more accurate, they can get their hand or foot to touch the required spot and retract it again. Another thing is because it is “Just a game of tag” they are not worried about getting hit or hurt so they can take a risk with something new and there is no suffering if it fails.

By implementing restrictions on the activity, it forces them to focus on a particular target, or using a hand or foot they would usually avoid using.

When using the foot as part of the activity, ensure you keep reminding them of the “tag” mindset though out, as it keeps them relaxed and focused on touching the other person with their foot, as in this case “a touch will score”.

Usually the best way is to get them to work in pairs like they will when they spar each other. There are many options for how you can use this, but I will explain a couple of common ones I use.

1. You can only tag your partner on the body. This gets them used to aiming their technique above the belt and getting past the opponents arms.
2. You can tag with your hand or your foot. This gets them used to adjusting their distance using an arm or leg for a combination or to fake and gets them used to “tagging” the other person with their foot.
3. Mixing it up with having person “A” can only tag the body with their foot & person “B” can only tag their partners shoulder. This gets them interacting just like they will when you are practicing sparring drills with one person kicking and the other can only punch.
4. Limit the options – they can only tag the top of the head and have to jump to do it, or they can only tag the belt with their foot. This forces them to practice being precise with their technique and to understand which scenarios the technique will or will not work in.

As the coach for Auckland North for the last few years I have often used this activity as a warm up for the sessions and have seen many people improve their sparring from this simple activity.

These are a few of the other things I try to keep in mind when teaching Taekwon-Do to children are.

Present new information in small steps.

The place in our brains where we process information is small—so when we're asked to learn too much at one time, we can get overwhelmed. A strategy called "chunking" can help with this. Chunking means teaching in small steps while checking for understanding along the way. Ginny Osewalt

Kids especially, need to learn in layers or "bite size pieces". Each item needs to be taught step by step, followed by a short explanation of the overall process. For kids I leave the explanation until last as often children can get focused on the overall effect and then place less attention on the details that they think are unimportant. So by breaking the item into pieces and each piece being added in layer by layer they focus on the task at hand instead of trying to race to complete the end product.

Practice makes permanent.

Practice makes perfect. No, practice makes permanent. Practice can be wasteful and unproductive unless you practice fewer, more important skills better and more deeply. "Practice Perfect: 42 Rules for Getting Better at Getting Better," by Doug Lemov, Erica Woolway and Katie Yezzi.

"Practice makes permanent". Repetition creates habit. Anything that they repeat they will continue to do, so if they repeat a good habit or technique then it will stick. If they repeat an incorrect item it will also stick with them. So it is important to praise the correct and fix the incorrect as it happens during the session rather than leaving till later "when you have time".

Begin a lesson by reviewing the last lesson.

The best teachers make sure students really understand the skills they need for the day's lesson. That's because the new lesson builds on the lesson of the day before. A study found that when teachers spent eight minutes every day going over homework and common mistakes, and practicing skills their students needed to memorize, students got higher test scores. Ginny Osewalt

It is good practice to revisit an item that had been introduced in the previous session.

Most of the time I will start with a simple question "Do you remember last session when we did...", then follow up with "what are the things you remember about it"?

From there you add in any important information or steps to the process that they had forgotten about the activity and then spend a few minutes practicing it again.

Children will copy.

*Scientists "have been finding this odd effect where **children will copy everything that they see an adult demonstrate** to them, even if there are clear or obvious reasons why those actions would be irrelevant," says psychologist Mark Nielsen, of the University of Queensland. "It's something that we know that other primates don't do." If a chimpanzee is shown an irrelevant action, they won't copy it — they'll skip right to the action that makes something happen. So from the mind of a child, "perhaps there's a reason why I'm doing this". This willingness to assume that an action has some unknown purpose, and to copy it, may be part of how humans develop and share culture, he says. By [Rick Nauert PhD](#)*

Most people "Learn what they see" and this is most obvious with children, which means that you must walk the talk. If you demonstrate anything you must do it how you want them to perform it, as anything you do will be mimicked. For example if you perform a technique correctly but without acceleration, then they will also perform it "Softly", or if you have a habit of punching with your thumbs loose, then that's what they will do as well. Every action and word is being processed by their very quickly developing brain.

References:

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<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/media/releases/2010/nielsen.cfm>
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www.understood.org/en/about/authors/ginny-osewalt