

Taekwondo Makes Kids Smart

The Strong Correlation Between Traditional Taekwon-do and Academic Achievement

by Kirk T. Schroder, J.D., Ph.D.

Parents have many choices among physical activities for their children. Such choices vary from traditional team sports like soccer, basketball, baseball and football to individual sports like tennis, track and field, swimming and gymnastics (to name a few). Generally, any form of regular physical activity is beneficial for children's health and overall well-being. However, well-established scientific research indicates that certain physical activities benefit children and young adults more than others — in particular, with higher school grades and academic achievement.

However, the physical activities, which many scientific researchers conclude, offer added benefits like higher academic achievement and better social behavior are not popular or emphasized in today's Western culture. Instead, Western culture emphasizes competitive sports with "winners and losers." It is not uncommon in today's Western sporting news to find many examples of lack of sportsmanship principles and a growing mindset to "win at all costs." This article is not suggesting to parents, children and others to avoid Western team and individual sports. Western team and individual sports provide enjoyment, physical and other benefits to participants. However, there are the scientifically proven benefits of non-Western physical training such as traditional Taekwon-do in lieu of or in addition to Western style sports and physical activities.

The Research is Quite Impressive

Although Taekwon-do and other forms of traditional martial arts date back to approximately 50 B.C., it's been only in the latter part of the 20th century that academic and scientific researchers have taken interest in studying the widely believed benefits of such practices. This emerging scientific research asks if traditional martial arts ---like the form of Taekwon-do taught in Grand Master Jae-Hwa Kwon's Fed-



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eration --- benefits continuing participants in two primary areas: 1) increased cognitive abilities such as higher academic achievement and 2) increased ability for self-regulation. So far, the conclusions of such research in both areas is quite impressive.

A Correlation Between Higher Academic Achievement and Traditional Taekwon-do

Many researchers find the goals of traditional martial arts to be similar to the goals of critical thinking as reflected in the groundbreaking research of Harvard University Professor Howard Gardner. In 1983, Gardner developed a theory that humans have "multiple intelligences"

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which has been innovative in education research.¹ In 2001, education researchers Juliet Choo and Paul Jewel, found a correlation between traditional martial arts goals and Gardner's theory of how critical thinking skills function in humans.² Specifically, Choo and Jewel observed that traditional martial arts stimulated many "intelligences" in its participants. Their study goes on to conclude that traditional martial arts has a measurable effect on improving concentration skills and is even recommended for gifted educa-

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tion students. It appears that traditional martial arts has a measurable effect on improving concentration skills. In 1995, a team of researchers conducted various concentration experiments and concluded that traditional martial arts integrates the mind and body in such a way to maximize focus and concentration.³ In another study, researcher Julian R. Fuller observed in a British medical journal that by requiring its participants to ignore distractions and to conduct confrontation work, traditional martial arts provides strategic procedures that positively affect problem solving and concentration skills.⁴ Contrary to chaotic thoughts and behaviors of individuals who cannot focus their attention, the fixed exercises of traditional martial arts helps develop organizational skills.⁵

Likewise, various studies have directly correlated the introduction of traditional Taekwon-do to higher student academic achievement. In 1995, a team of researchers studied 94 boys and 99 girls in grades K-5 to see if introducing traditional Taekwon-do in the school curriculum for a three month period would increase student academic achievement. Their results found significant improved cognitive skills especially in mathematics for those students who took the traditional Taekwon-do training.⁶ It comes as no surprise that Grand Master Jae-Hwa Kwon, widely recognized as one of the great martial arts masters of the twentieth century, emphasizes a “strong mind” for his students just as he expects them to show good physical techniques.

Increasing One’s Own “Self-Regulation”

Generally, researchers in the area of psychology and human behavior refer to “self-regulation” as the ability to alter one’s own responses including thoughts, emotions

and behaviors. Traditional martial arts like traditional Taekwon-do rate very high in many research studies in improving a person’s capacity at self-regulation.⁷ In particular, traditional Taekwon-do significantly helps children address and cope in social situations both with peers and adults.⁸ Traditional Taekwon-do is a very effective method to increase one’s ability of self-control especially in stressful and other difficult settings. This is helpful for children who tend to be bullies, victims of bullies, impulsive and/or are angry at those in positions of authority. Researchers have

found that traditional Taekwon-do introduces an ability for health and more relaxed interaction with others.

Big Differences Between “Modern” Martial Arts v. Traditional Martial Arts

Not all forms of martial arts are the same. Many “modern” traditions of martial arts compromise the zen principles inherent in their lineage in order to simulate Western style sports especially around notions of win-lose competition and combativeness. Michael E. Trulson of Texas A&M University, in his research of the differences in the traits of modern martial arts and tradition forms, identifies three primary differences:

Traditional Taekwon-do significantly helps children address and cope in social situations both with peers and adults.

1. Traditional martial arts instructors are offered as role models of the highest character, and
2. Physical training methods in traditional martial arts include an integration of philosophical and psychological training. Specifically, traditional martial arts instructors emphasize in their teachings: respect, humility, confidence, responsibility, honesty, perseverance and honor (and they do not compromise those values with their students), and
3. Traditional martial arts places a strong emphasis on self-control and on only using martial arts techniques for self-defense (and not as a tool to initiate conflict).

According to Trulson’s research, the three factors above are the critical components of traditional martial arts that produce the academic, social and psychological benefits discussed in this paper. They are also essential foundations of teaching and practice that one will find in Grandmaster Kwon’s Taekwon-do Federation.



Conclusion

Television, smartphones and other technological gadgets continue to “dumb down” children and adults by adversely affecting their ability to focus and concentrate. Traditional Taekwon-do is one few true exercise methods to: 1) effectively address the negative aspects of today’s technology culture and 2) develop healthy and positive psychological and philosophical character traits. Grandmaster Kwon’s Taekwon-do, is a lifestyle that holds high expectations not only in physical and mental achievements but in many of life’s endeavors.

Kirk T. Schroder is a practicing student of Taekwon-do at the International Black Belt center of Virginia. He served as president of the Virginia Board of Education from 1998-



2002 and hold a Ph.D in Education from the University of Virginia and a law degree from the University of Richmond.

¹ In the 30th anniversary edition of his famous book *Frames of Mind*, Gardner states “I was claiming that all human beings possess not just a single intelligence... Rather, as a species we human beings are better described as having a set of relatively autonomous intelligences.” ² Choo, J. & Jewell, P. (2001) “Martial Arts and Critical Thinking in the Gifted Education Curriculum”, *TalentEd*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 13. ³ Weiser, M., Kurtz, I., Kurts, S.J. & Weiser, D. (1995) “Psychotherapeutic Aspects of Martial Arts”, *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 49(1), 118-127. ⁴ Fuller, J. R. (1988) “Marital Arts and Psychological Health”, *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 61, 317-328. ⁵ See Footnote 3. ⁶ Lakes, K.D. & Hoyt, W.T. (2004) “Promoting Self-Regulation through School-Based Martial Arts Training”, *Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 25, 283-302. ⁷ See generally Id. ⁸ Kim, I (2004) “Treating Violence in the School Through Traditional Martial Arts”, *International Journal of Educational Reform*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 308-321. This scholarly article cites many other empirical and descriptive research on this point. ⁹ Trulson, M. E. (1986). *Martial Arts Training: A Novel “Cure” For Juvenile Delinquents*. *Human Relations*, 39, 1131-1140.

