

LETTER TO PARENTS: The Many Benefits of Learning Aikido

That there are benefits to studying martial arts is something both parents and children can agree on. Children get to tap into their fantasy life and begin the physical practice that embodies being a hero or heroine. Parents get to see their children benefit from the martial arts' emphasis on discipline and respectful behavior, coordination and balance, and increasing integration of the mind, body, and spirit.

Study of Aikido is particularly good for many children because of the peaceful philosophy of O'Sensei, Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido. The calmer and more relaxed a person is, the better decisions that person can make in a difficult situation. *Aiki* is harmony. *Aikido is the way of harmonizing oneself with the universe.* An aikidoist protects him or herself and takes care of the well being of their partners (attackers) precisely because their bodies and minds are trained to stay relaxed. Aikido has no competitions, or emphasis on kicking and punching. O'Sensei was a modern man and he knew we must find ways to get along and protect one another to preserve our world. To him, *Aiki* meant love one another.

The methods of achieving this grace under pressure is through centering and breathing, and moving off the direct line of attack. We re-shape the energy of the attack through spiral motions. When children take turns during partner practices, they learn to find the right level of applying their touch to another. Aikidoists actually must work harmoniously together while they learn the techniques. They really practice "going with the flow."

Our school provides a very strong emphasis on inner awareness through building the *hara*. The *hara* is where you feel that "gut feeling." We create a place of stillness in the child by bringing the breath deep while we sit together watching the teacher on the *seiza* line. (This is a foundation that can be used for later meditation practices.) We call it "sitting like a rock." Parents at our school say, "Sit like a rock" when they want to restore calm to a child. We build our centers in action, too. When an aikidoist counters an attack, the center cuts through the attacker's center. Knowing where our center points gives precise focus to the defensive movements we teach the children.

Aikido is remarkable among the martial arts for its rolling defense. An aikido roll is a combination of a log roll and a somersault. You've seen aikido rolls if you have seen a stunt man roll over the hood of a moving car. The head tucks, preventing concussion and whiplash. Rolling is a great way to get the whole body strong and supple.

Children enjoy learning to become better and better at aikido rolls. As our students get more advanced they hurl themselves through the air, leaping and flying through space. They turn into human hoops before they touch ground. We often use thickly padded mats so that beginners can become fearless about practicing. For kids, rolls are the most fun part of Aikido.

Rolling provides the same type of stimulation for the brain as trampoline practices now widely used by occupational and physical therapists in overcoming learning deficits. Tumbling upside down stimulates the two halves of the brain to interpret the sensory input. This builds many crossover connections across the midline of the brain, enhancing perception and coordination.

We see our students become stronger, more coordinated, and more confident every day in our classes. Regular practice is the key to these results. This year, 2004, some of our students joined our first teen class. We are very proud of them because we have seen the many changes in their lives as they move toward adulthood. It is a pleasure for us to witness and be part of their continuing development.

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