

Parents on a Kick for Disciplinary Art

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Dallas – Greg Tubb's charges trickle in, deliver a bow of respect, and greet him with a brisk "Hello, sir!" They go through their paces – running, kicking, punching.

"Come here, D-Man," he tells Daniel Sifuentes, who gets a job-well-done hug.

Resting after class, 11-year-old Daniel says tae kwon do has helped him become a nicer kid. Before his frazzled mother enrolled him, he says, "I was, like, a creep."

Anteing Up

Forget Boy Scout leaders. Forget therapists, Suburban parents, strapped for time or simply unsure about discipline, are turning to tae-kwon-do studios to teach their kids obedience and respect. Once just another after-school activity, the martial-arts classes have become something of a cross between counseling and boot camp.

Parents come to Chung's Taekwondo studio outside Dallas and say, "Fix my kid," says business manager David Bacon. "They're just throwing up their hands, and bringing them to us."

Studios, in turn, aggressively cultivate this potential market with ads and sales pitches that promise to raise grades, correct bad attitudes and increase concentration – all just for \$75 a month.

And parents are anteing up. The U.S. Taekwondo Union, (one of) the sport's (affiliations), estimates that 6.3 million people take tae kwon do in the U.S. today, up from 1.6 million in 1990. The fastest-growing group is under 12 years old.

The tae-kwon-do method is hardly revolutionary, but it includes more rigid, old-fashioned discipline than most '90s parents are prepared to muster. Pronounced tie-kwon-doe (which means "kick-strike-art" in Korean), the martial art grew out of seventh-century military training for young noblemen charged with protecting kingdoms in what is now Korea. Its modern incarnation includes lessons in integrity and self-control along with spinning, kicking and learning to break (wood) with your hand. Though still gentler than their Asian counterparts, American instructors typically set strict rules for behavior, with penalties ranging from push-ups to a drop in rank.

"I try to do the parents' job for them," says Master Jimin Kim, who runs a studio near Dallas. He goes a lot further than most, using two foam paddles to spank severe offenders. Mr. Kim insists they inflict little actual pain, but make a loud, startling noise. He says parents often complain to him about their children's misconduct, knowing he will take care of it, and believes most American parents are too lax with their children.

"Get Used to It"

One mom said, "Oh, Master Kim, it breaks my heart when my kid cries," he says matter-of-factly. "And I say, well, you get used to it."

In fact, most parents don't subscribe to the notion that tae kwon do alone turns kids around. That's "sort of a myth" says Laura Roddy, who says discipline for her seven-year-old son has to start at home. Still, she says, "Master Kim has given me the strength to be a littler meaner" than parenting magazines recommend.

Believers include some doctor and counselors, who have referred problem children to studios. The 3,000-member National Attention Deficit Disorder Association, in Mentor, Ohio, is adding a tae-kwon-do page to its Internet site as a possible aid. Association President Howard Morris, of Ann Arbor, Mich., says the sport has helped his own 10-year-old to focus and calm down.

Gail Fischer of Tampa, Fla., coaxed her 13-year-old, Alan, into taking tae kwon do last year, hoping it would improve his unruly behavior. A preschool teacher, she had tried all sorts of discipline. Still, Mrs. Fischer says, "there was a call daily from a teacher." She says Alan's attitude has become more respectful since taking the classes.

At Mr. Tubb's studio in Plano, Texas, students can't advance in rank until he reviews their report cards and teachers' comments. Parents must submit a monthly checklist showing how the child has done on "home rules," which include brushing teeth and taking out the garbage.

No-Brainer

And parents quickly learn that tattling is effective. Bridgette Massingale says she told on her rebellious nine-year-old, Travis, when he got

into fights at school. "He doesn't mind when I tell my husband, but if I tell Mr. Tubbs, it's like, 'Oh my God,'" she says. For Travis, it's a no-brainer. Mr. Tubbs will "yell at you sometimes for two days," the youngster says.

Mrs. Massingale enrolled Travis on the advice of a teacher. "My husband works a lot and isn't around a lot, and he needed a male role model," she says. She has since enrolled her 12-year-old daughter.

Mr. Tubbs, 34, starts some classes by gathering everyone around him for heart-to-heart talks. Parent Janice Cooper remembers melting one day when he asked the class, "What have you done for your Mom lately?" One child mentioned Mother's Day, but he cut her off. "I'm talking about last weekend," he said. "Wouldn't it be nice if you let her sleep in one day, or brought her a glass of iced tea?"

The 6-foot-3 Mr. Tubbs was a third-degree black belt and five-time state champion before he began the business two years ago, spending his pension from his former job as a Dallas firefighter. His studio, Chang Lee's TaeKwonDo, now has 170 students and brings in about \$4,000 a month after rent is paid.

Watching in Awe

In a recent class, Mr. Tubb's beginner group of about 30 ranges from preschoolers to young teens. They all line up quickly when called to attention. He roams among them, giving encouragement and pointers. But students who act up receive swift reprimands. "I didn't tell you to do that, did I?" he barks when a boy ventures an unauthorized kick.

In a hallway outside the gym, parents watching the class say they are in awe of Mr. Tubb's skill with the children. Janice Cooper says that when her son Eric, 7, suffered a severe asthma attack last month, he asked Mr. Tubbs, not his mother, to ride with him in the ambulance.

Brittany Levesque says her son Michael, 14, improved his grades after joining Mr. Tubb's school. She learned a few lessons, too. "I insist on them respecting me now, and I didn't before," she says. She recently enrolled in Mr. Tubb's adult class, figuring she could improve her own discipline and self-control.