

Cutting Edge Martial Arts

Parent's Guide

This is a guide intended to help parents ensure their kids have the best martial arts experience possible at Cutting Edge Martial Arts. It assumes that parents want their kids to remain active martial arts; if this is not the case for whatever reason, please talk to me as soon as possible.

It will start with our goals as instructors, progress to generalities that will help students of all ranks, and then quickly go into specifics for beginners.

Our Goals

A great many Olympic Taekwondo instructors (and those from other sports-focused martial arts) teach because of their passion for the competitive side of the art. We are not those instructors, though kids are welcome to compete at one of the area tournaments as they can be a valuable learning experience and often inspire kids to train harder in class. Our primary goals are to help kids become stronger – mentally, emotionally, and physically – to be more confident and capable and self-assured, help learn how and when to lead or follow, and generally be comfortable in their own skin regardless of circumstances.

While the curriculum we teach is valuable, what kids learn about themselves – how to be who they are and how to become who they want to become – is far more important.

Our disciplines as an instructors:

- 1) **Students are never "wrong" or "bad"**. That doesn't mean that we enable bad behavior or that students don't make mistakes, it means some things are helpful and constructive, others aren't, and mistakes are momentary and fixable. We endeavor to never make students feel like *they* are wrong or bad and encourage them to establish a positive view of failures as necessary risks and steps to achieve success.
- 2) **We are *always* on the student's side**. Even if a child is challenging authority, pushing boundaries, goofing off, or just spacing out and they receive push-ups or some other form of discipline to bring them back into line, our goal is always to help them notice their behavior and recognize when it isn't helping them and/or is hindering others.
- 3) **Every student is equal on the mat**. Human nature plays favorites, but we work hard not to make any child feel left out, on their own, singled-out, or, the flip-side, that they don't have to follow the same rules as everyone else or are better than anyone else.
- 4) **Availability**. If a student (or parent or former student) needs my help or needs to talk about something that is troubling them – martial arts/self-defense related or otherwise – I am available to talk with them and do whatever I can to help.

If anyone feels we not are following any of these disciplines at any point, please let me know immediately so we can reflect and self-correct to be closer to our intentions.

Curriculum

Many new parents have questions about **belt and stripe testing** so here is the basic overview of how we handle promotions. Kids earn six stripes per belt, each covering various elements of taekwondo such as kicks, self-defense techniques, and forms. If a child feels they have a grasp of their newest material, they may test with an instructor after class. If they pass, they gain a new stripe, if not, the instructor will let them know what they need to work on and they may try again the next class they attend.

Once a child has all six stripes, they are eligible to test at the next belt test, usually held on a Saturday around 1pm every six weeks. To sign up for the test, a test application form (available at the school) along with a \$45 testing fee are due the Friday before the belt test.

Helping your kids

I) The number one thing parents can do to help kids be successful in martial arts is to **get students to class regularly**. Most kids thrive on regularity and stability and struggle with change and unpredictability. The **number one determinant of success** in martial arts that I've observed in over a decade of teaching is **simply showing up**. We recommend **two classes a week** as a minimum if at all possible. Our reasoning is as follows:

- 1) **Progression**. Students who attend regularly **learn content faster**. Most kids love the feeling of accomplishment they get earning their next stripe and how quickly a child progresses is in largest part a result of how often they are at class.
- 2) **Forgetting**. Kids who come once a week or less **often struggle to just remember what they learned** the previous week, much less make progress as a week seems to be just enough time to start to forget what was learned previously. On harder stripes (the black stripes are the most common culprits) it can then be difficult to make much headway as very few students are able to learn a new form or set of techniques and test successfully on the same day. After a week or more has gone by without practicing them they often need to relearn everything almost from scratch.
- 3) **Discipline**. One of the things many parents value about martial arts is the focus and self-discipline it instills in students. **The biggest part of discipline is consistency** and it is very difficult to establish consistency as an instructor when the student's attendance is sporadic.

II) The number two thing parents can do to help their kids is to help them **find their purpose** for being at taekwondo and help them **set goals** based on that. The goal depends on the student and parents will likely know better than I do what it is that motivates them. Some example goals and motivations:

- 1) **Belts**. Some kids are naturally goal-oriented and so **earning their stripes to get the next belt** might be the best inspiration.
- 2) **Competition**. Other kids are more focused on competition. Focusing on **preparing for an upcoming tournament** – be it forms, sparring, or both – can really push competitive kids to work hard.
- 3) **Self-Defense**. Some kids – especially those picked on by bullies – really benefit from the self-defense we teach. Note that self-defense *almost never* means fighting, but focuses more on doing whatever is necessary to reduce the physical and/or emotional harm inflicted by an aggressive and/or dangerous person or situation. The self-confidence gained from martial arts practice alone has been known to change a child's demeanor enough that bullies stop picking on them. One goal a child might set is to **learn how to protect themselves** from particular types of bully or situations and ask about it in class.
- 4) **Friends**. Very few children make it to black belt without some sort of support and/or friendship of their classmates. If your child is especially social, wants to have or has friends in class, **encouraging them to make friends and/or come to the same classes as friends** can be a great motivator.

Beginners

White through Senior Yellow Belts

At the beginner level kids will be learning the basics of everything: class routine, discipline, self-discipline and self-control, focus, basic martial arts and simple self-defense techniques, introduction to the sport side of taekwondo, and getting to know the other beginners in their class.

In class, kids will test for stripes in class that show their progress through their current rank. Once they have six stripes on their belt, they are eligible - and highly encouraged - to promote at the next belt promotion test where they can earn the next color/rank of belt.

Beginners have several advantages going for them: everything is new and exciting, they are enthusiastic, and they have not developed any bad habits that need to be corrected. They do, however, have their own **unique sets of challenges**:

- 1) **Dealing with failure.** Beginners will all eventually reach a point where they fail. It might be not passing a stripe test, having to make corrections after a belt test, or even simply not being allowed to test after a class because they don't know the material well enough. While we work hard to view and express failure positively and encourage them to try again the next time they are in class, some children have more difficulty dealing with the let down of not meeting the demands they had placed on themselves. On occasion they may even want to give up or quit afterward.

Letting them know they did well and that **they can *always* practice and try again** at the next class is often the most helpful thing parents can do. Suggesting they practice a bit extra before or after class and/or ask help from a higher-ranked student or instructor if one is available during this time can also help.

- 2) **Falling behind.** Kids all progress at different rates, depending on their age, physical and mental maturity, coordination, attendance, memory, enthusiasm, and a myriad of other factors. Kids often do not recognize those factors and if they see another student "get ahead of them" – via stripe or belt progression – they can take it to mean not that the other child worked harder, had something just *click*, or simply was just in class more frequently but instead that they themselves are stupid, slow, or in some other way inferior to the "faster child".

Letting them know that everyone progresses and is *expected to progress* at their own rate, that there is no competition, and that **other students' progress doesn't mean anything about your child's competence** can all be helpful. That said, if the other child *was* working much harder in class, a gentle reminder of that fact to help your child focus on working harder themselves might not be remiss.

- 3) **Bogging down.** Some of the first stripes can be challenging, especially for younger students. Sometimes a child can end up working on the same stripe for days, weeks, or occasionally even months, to the point where the child might even not want to attend as they know they will just be “working on the same thing over and over”. Some children expect all stripes to be as easy and quick as the first few and have a hard time when the stripes get difficult, forcing them to focus and apply themselves to earn them. If it reaches the point of boredom, they often stop trying, ensuring they will not learn whatever it is and be “stuck” working on it *again* in the next class.

The **last white belt stripe is *the* most difficult stripe kids ever earn** as it is the first form and a big step up in difficulty from the other stripes. If they can get that stripe, they can get any other stripe all the way up to red belt.

Reminding them that some stripes are more difficult than others, that it **only takes a few classes of focusing and working hard to earn most stripes**, and that they will get to learn cool new things once they make it past the current "roadblock" may help them work past it.

Remember that I am always open to and appreciative of **feedback about where your child is at**, whether they are loving it, worried about coming to class, or anything in between. Please email me, call, or talk to me at the dojang if you have any questions concerns or comments.

Intermediate

Green through Senior Blue Belts

Kids in intermediate class have in many ways the most difficult time maintaining interest in taekwondo. They know and are expected to remember the not-insignificant amount of material they have already learned, continue to improve in fitness, technique, self-control, focus, discipline, begin to learn to lead and teach, all while learning an increasingly difficult array of forms, kicks, and self-defense techniques. Regular attendance is perhaps *most important* at this level.

While some of the beginner-level challenges might remain, they have their own challenges to overcome:

1) **Overload.** Kids in the intermediate level have learned dozens of forms, one-steps, weapon forms, self-defense techniques, footwork elements, drills, stances, kicks, and hand techniques. They have usually have not yet reached the level where they have performed enough repetitions that the techniques are implanted in muscle memory and can be easily recalled. Each class they might seem to face a choice between refreshing what they knew or progressing on something new. Kids who are ashamed of forgetting something and don't ask for help because they are ashamed often believe they are falling irreparably far behind and can start to dread class because of it.

There isn't much parents can help with on this one except be sure your child **attends class regularly**. If they do forget, you can tell them **it's okay to ask for help** or let us know they forgot so we can help them – if they are concerned about talking to us, please contact us personally to let us know. It rarely takes more than one or two classes to get mostly “caught up” on everything.

2) **Plateauing.** Often kids who reach intermediate class feel like they aren't making much progress. Much of it is because their new techniques and forms are much more difficult than the previous ones, but it can also just seem like they aren't getting any better or, alternately, that they have basic techniques “down”. There is always further to progress, but intermediate students are in the midst of practicing the basics until they have a platform on which they can develop advanced technique and the required repetition can feel like stalling out.

Reminding kids how much they already know and that **some things just take a lot of practice** to get down can be helpful. Letting them know there's more cool stuff to learn (especially if they make it to advanced class) can help as well.

3) **Age-gapping.** This problem mostly occurs with kids who are the only twelve or thirteen year-olds in beginner's class and can sometimes find themselves a foot taller and two or three years older than any other kid in class. The fact that this occurs when kids are just starting to hit the super self-conscious tween years doesn't help things any.

If this is happening, the best thing to do to have them jump up to the Teen/Advanced class since they will probably fit in better size and age-wise. Alternately, they might come to some of the slower-paced adult classes (Monday Classes, Wednesday Forms Class) where they feel less intimidated. Each case is unique and I'm willing to find a solution that works for all of us.

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Advanced

Red Belts through Black Belt Candidates

Once kids make it to the advanced class, they know almost everything they need to to become a black belt. There is a lot to remember, but by this point they have practiced, learned, and re-learned it all so many times that even if they miss a few weeks or months and forget everything, they can usually get it back within a few weeks. It's also the coolest class kids get to go to; they get advanced self-defense such as gun, knife, and multi-opponent defense, high-level sparring, advanced weapons forms, and occasionally bits and pieces of other martial arts such as Aikido, Tai Chi, and Muay Thai.

At this point the biggest difficulties have less to do with the content of the class and more with other distractions:

1) **Other activities and responsibilities.** By the time they reach advanced class, most kids are in or near middle or high school. Their homework load increases dramatically and many other activities and sports often start to become alluring.

Helping remind kids **they are potentially within a year or a year-and-a-half of their black belt** can often help them push through if other activities begin to consume their focus.

2) **Slower progression.** The required time between belt test increases to three-months for all ranks of red belt. After red belt kids no longer receive stripes, so those focused on incremental rewards will likely need to take a longer view to maintain interest. Some kids grow impatient having to wait, but no black belt I have ever talked to regrets having the extra time to hone their skills in preparation for their black belt test.

As with the previous point, **reminding them how close they are** to a hard-earned black belt they are is probably the best way to help them maintain interest.

3) **Black belt test anxiety.** While it doesn't happen often, there are a certain number of kids who reach black belt candidate (the last rank before black belt), hear about the requirements and/or overhear black belts talking about how hard the test can be, and quit. I now do what I can to avoid "over selling" the difficulty, but it is a fine line between instilling confidence in their abilities and making sure they are working hard enough to prepare them so they actually make it through the test.

Having them talk to one of the black belts in their class might help, or even just pointing **out that other kids have made it** (several as young as 10 even!) so it is possible. As always, if they are still worried about it, have them talk with me about it.

For any of these, it might also be helpful to talk to an older black belt student who tested when they were kids – there are several teenage black-belts of both genders available who would love to talk to them about their experiences as red belts getting ready to test and how the test itself went for them. If this sounds appealing, please let me know and I can put you in touch with them.

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Black Belts

Even people who don't know martial arts know that black belt is "special". There's a whole mythology around achieving the rank that brings a certain level of respect and expectation even from those who have never stepped on the mat. The black belt tests are designed to be among of the most difficult tasks students have ever attempted and rarely fails to live up to that expectation.

Once kids have black belt, however, they sometimes say "I made it, I'm done" and stop. I can say from personal experience I learned and improved more as a 1st degree black belt both as a person and a martial artist than I did in all my time as a colored belt - even more so between the higher degrees! It is only when the basics are comprehensively understood and the regular pressure of belt tests is left behind that one can really begin to understand what the martial art is really about and truly start to "get it".

At this level, there is only really one difficulty: **deciding the role of martial arts in their life**. Is it a life-long pursuit, something they will strive to achieve mastery in, do they want to have a school or club some day? Will they compete, teach, or aim to train until they reach second or third degree black belt or higher? Some combination of these?

Most kids are in middle or high school by the time they reach black belt and other ways to spend their time are varied and numerous. Until a black belt decides the what role martial arts will play in their future they can feel unfocused on the mat, unsure of what exactly they are working towards. Once they have a goal, kids usually regain the former enjoyment they may have lost after finally reaching the goal they had strived for for so long.

For some kids, maintaining interest is not an issue, but even for them it is probably worthwhile to **talk with them about their goals in martial arts** – what they seek to get from it, to achieve, and the whether it is a short-term or long term pursuit.

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