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Article Title: Teaching philosophy of "The Little Dragons" pre-school karate class.

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Abstract: This is an outline of my personal teaching philosophy and some routines used in teaching preschoolers a basic karate class.

INTRODUCTION

The Little Dragons of Kadena Air Base, Okinawa began in April 1997 and were a steady, full class on Kadena AFB until I consolidated classes in my Nagahama Dojo in 2000. It would probably make a great summer program almost anywhere, while the Kadena class did thrive as a year-round program.

My youngest was 2 years old when he began, and I accepted children as Little Dragons until they were actually in 1st grade. Some of these kids were pretty big for pre-school and kindergarten, but they all got along. In fact, the bigger children took the very grown-up responsibility of watching out for the littler kids, like they were all big brothers and sisters.

Classes were one hour long twice weekly per group. I gave a short break between tasks for water, pats on the back, hugs from Mommy, etc., so the class was broken into 5 or 6 segments of 10-12 minutes each. It was very important that a parent attended to watch and encourage. Young children are not expected to "grow up and be an adult" at age two through five!

The first 3/4 of the class was spent on junbi undo (warm-ups, revised so the children don't get exhausted), then hojo undo (revised -- no special stance, just feet slightly apart, and some drills omitted because of complexity), then sanchin (UechiRyu-based, described below). The advanced students went on to Kanshiwa (the 2nd kata of the UechiRyu system) with my assistant, while the others stayed with me and reviewed the previous material but in game or riddle form ("What's this called -- OK, let's do it but backwards!..." etc.). All wauke (or mawashi uke – circle blocks) were described as "push down, push across, wrap around and pull". Children counted all moves out loud with me.

The last 1/4 or more of the class was game playing. Among the favorites were Ninja Chases Dragons, in which I (the "evil ninja") chased the group from one side of the dojo to the other. When they put their hand on the wall (or crowd onto a wrestling mat -- "Dragon Island"), they were "home free". Then they had to think of a way to "distract me" ("Hey Sensei, I think the phone is ringing... look, it's your Mommy!... there's a snake behind you... it's raining and you left your windows open!... etc.), and I had to "go take care of it". As soon as the coast was clear, all the Dragons rushed to the other side of the dojo (wall or mat). Naturally, I never actually succeeded in catching any Dragons, and the really little ones were "protected" by the bigger ones (if I got too close to catching a small, slow-running child, a bigger child ran out and "fought" with me to protect the smaller one until they could both return to safety). The threat was that I pretended to "chop up" the Dragon and feed him to my "ninja poodles" or "samurai Chihuahua" or something equally ludicrous. All along the way, I good-naturedly chewed out my assistant as if their escape was all his or her fault. The kids loved this, so did the parents.

Other games were Weed Whacker, Attention Game, Dragons Chase Ninja (they chase me, and I try to distract them), Silent Ball (or Hot Potato, using a soft foam ball), and a form of hacky-sack played with balloons (must keep it in the air with kicks, knees, or elbows only, and the children cannot bump into or even touch each other -- part of the skill is speed and avoidance. A child who bumps must sit down until only one child is left standing OR the game has become too long to continue).

Dragon's Egg Racing was popular -- the children were broken into teams, and must get to the other side of the dojo as fast as possible -- with an empty paper cup on their head. When reaching that side, they place a plastic egg in the cup and put it back on their heads, then get back to the other side and put the egg in a "nest" (a basket). They may NOT touch the cup or hold it in place to balance it. If it fell, they had to take it back to the far side of the dojo and try again. The team with the most Dragon Eggs after three minutes was the winner. They must count the number of eggs out loud in Japanese. These games all develop motor skills, social skills, sense of fair play, balance, and build camaraderie "among the troops".

I never used punishment other than "time out". I never used phrases like "You're here to act like young adults... Grow up... Act your age..." and the like. I never used or allowed derogatory adjectives like "you're stupid... dumb... ugly... bad" etc. I never shouted at the children except when it's part of the game.

All games were karate-oriented but fun, and taught basic motor and social skills. I did not teach a karate system per say, just very basic motions. These kids were as young as 2 or 3 years old -- sanchin for them is different from that for a teen or adult, and I broke it down into 4 sections (the story of the Mountain, the Two Dragons, and the Three Typhoons). Each section was learned slowly, and is commensurate with a "Little Dragon" rank level.

I approximated stance and blocks, etc. until the child was older, or began earnestly to imitate movements with more precision. One foot in front of the other was more important than a perfect angle of foot placement. Learning left from right was a major achievement at this age -- don't get too strict on the exact performance. I avoided giving directions like "Right Sanchin means step off to the right, with a right wauke" and preferred "Turn that way and push the wall down with a big circle and a strong push!"

Learn to make faces. Practice this in the mirror -- they are important in emphasizing certain lessons or in games (role-playing, etc.). Don't be a Somber Sensei, afraid to have fun.

The key word for any game is SAFETY. If a game is unsafe in any way for the age group, don't use it! Example: games that involve punching or kicking with contact between students are NOT safe for 3 and 4 year old children. Little Dragons do NOT punch or kick each other -- they have not yet learned to "hold back" and will give it everything they have, thereby injuring each other or themselves.

For play sparring, only the instructor and assistant may safely "fight" with a child. Games involving weapons may not be suitable for some students at all. Make sure all participants are well prepared for playing and learning.

The Sensei or a qualified adult assistant, not by another youth student, must supervise all games. Especially, monitor any game closely which might involve physical contact between students.

Rank levels were quite plentiful, but there was no fee for testing. First yellow stripe on the belt was just for coming out of the shell, so to speak. When a child willingly participated in classes without having to run and hide behind Mommy or Daddy, and tried to perform the motions with the group, it was time to recognize and honor that special achievement and growth with a stripe and certificate. Second stripe was for improved coordination and earnest attitude, and was also not tested for -- just announced at the end of a class (with applause) and awarded. Certificates were awarded -- more applause -- at the next class session (teacher needs time to letter and register these). These are essentially confidence-builders. Third stripe and up were actually tested for, so they had more meaning and importance to the child. Ranks could be bypassed -- a child with 2 stripes could test and earn the fourth stripe or yellow belt, or even go higher. Some children shoot ahead and need to be shown that acquiring a specific skill level earns recognition of that level.

Regular ranks are based on the ten-kyu system. Little Dragon ranks broke these further into 3 or 4 more levels per regular rank, to reward short-term goals. Frequent reward and recognition is very important at this age. The whole point is to encourage development and have fun by making skills attainable while keeping the ranks realistic.

Good-looking certificates are important. For most preschoolers, this may be the FIRST certificate of achievement they will ever receive -- make it look good for them! Parents will frame them, and usually put them where the child can proudly point and say "See what I did!" Mine had a color dragon background, dojo seals, were hand-lettered with the child's name, date, and rank, and signed. This made it an important document for both the child and parent. And it wasn't "fake", but a real certificate expressing appreciation and acknowledgement of growth and skills. All issued certificates were numbered and registered. Years from now, someone will say "I began my karate training with Sensei X in the year Y" and there will be a registered certificate.

When a child outgrew the Little Dragons class, he or she moved up into the regular youth classes. Some children outgrew the class in skills, others in age. Eventually, the child fit into the regular class. Rank was maintained until the child exceeded the same commensurate skill level as the regular students. A yellow belt with 2 purple stripes equals a regular nanakyu in my classes, so when the child reaches the rokkukyu level, he/she was tested for the regular rank like all the others -- this is what I meant by keeping ranks realistic. A Little Dragon Purple Belt level equated to the skills needed for a regular purple belt, except the skills needed to get there are acknowledged more incrementally along the way.

Be careful to fully explain to parents how, why, and when ranks are awarded. Children do not understand the concept of rank, and are just as happy with a pat on the back and a smile as they are with a stripe or new belt. Often, the rank is more important to the parents, who tend to take it all much more seriously. Don't let the Little League Syndrome run amok among the adults watching ("Why does that boy have three stripes while my son has only one? My boy works so much harder!... MAKE THAT BLOCK -- C'MON, YOU'LL NEVER GET A YELLOW BELT THAT WAY!!!... Why are you so clumsy, just look at that other boy, how GOOD he is..." etc.). Make the rank level requirements and process of selection, testing, grading, etc. VERY clear to the parents, especially that this is solely your jurisdiction.

I let children win when playing games, sparring, etc. Sometimes I let them knock me on my butt -- everyone laughs! For pre-school children, my place is NOT to teach the major lessons in life, nor supply trauma and injury, or "wake a child up to reality". These lessons will come in their own time and are best handled by the parent. At this early age, the world is still a magic place and everything is new and fun. I kept it that way. For that very short time of their lives, my Little Dragons were encouraged to face the world with a winner's attitude -- and in this class everyone was a winner.

Keep the parents in the loop! I try to have a parent or guardian present for each child whenever possible. The study material was written for the adult to assist the child, with the assumption that the adult knows no karate but can follow the simple directions and help the child practice at home. Simple enough to follow but not insulting to the intelligence of the parent -- the fine art of communication.

I also found it quite beneficial to ask one of the parents (usually a Mom) to volunteer to assist in the classes. This adult became the class "Sempai", and in return for assistance in the class she received regular karate lessons for free (rather than pay an assistant, she got trained as a regular student). Her child also attended the Little Dragons class tuition-free. All others paid a small monthly fee per child. Be careful in selecting your assistant -- he or she must be in good active physical condition, show great interest, show an aptitude for conveying concepts well, is willing to work with the children, and attends constantly. I began my selection process by announcing one day "I need one brave Mommy to help me keep the children in one straight line while they take turns sparring with me." One mom proved to be better at this than the others, even to the point of keeping the children's attention on the sparring session and not on playing games with each other and "goofing around". She taught them how to encourage the fighter by leading a cheering squad, and getting them all to shout some "helpful advice", etc. It was all in the name of good fun and healthy activity. Later she gave the children a dragon on paper to color. She showed initiative and planned her own Little Dragons oriented handout material. After she took over teaching the Little Dragons class altogether, this developed into a weekly handout and became a "Little Dragons Coloring Book".

Teaching the children strengthened her karate immensely by allowing her to slow techniques down and review basics at every class. She worked her way up to Ikkyu level, and except for her family's military change of station (assigned to a new base in the USA) she would probably have tested for Shodan.

As you can see, much more can be done with a preschooler's class than many teachers realize -- good, healthy training is important to youngsters at this stage. What it takes most of all is endless patience and energy. If you let the kids down, frighten them, or fail to keep your word, you risk losing their trust (and their parent's), and quite possibly initiating a traumatic experience that will color a child's life forever. How many times have you heard of (or been victimized by) the wrongful or frightening actions of an adult or sitter when you were just out of the toddling stage, or by the careless actions of a poorly trained or jaded teacher?

The enormous positive impact a teacher has on a young child can set the pace for enthusiastic, healthy growth and development on many levels for the rest of that child's learning years. As instructors, we must take our responsibilities seriously, and prepare material and class agenda professionally -- even for the "fun" classes...