

***Martial arts can be great for your child's fitness and confidence. But when your child comes home begging to learn how to be a "ninja" or wants to learn Kung Fu like everybody's favourite panda, how does a parent who has never had any experience in martial arts know which is the best style to choose for their child?***

*This article, while written with children in mind, is entirely appropriate for prospective teen, young adult and grown up students too.  
An experienced female instructor explains ;*

### **What are the different martial arts and how can I tell them apart?**

Martial arts fall loosely under the categories of sport styles, traditional styles, modern styles, hybrids, combat styles, mixed styles and more! For the most part, and as a very "beginner" guide (not a definitive analysis) you can define a martial art by whether it is a competitive, or wholly focussed on self-defence.

**Sport:** Sport styles (such as Judo, Taekwondo and Karate) often open up lifelong opportunities such the Olympics or the international University Games. Other styles include Brazilian Jujitsu, Olympic Taekwondo, Karate, Boxing, Muay Thai / Kickboxing.

**Traditional:** These styles emphasise the tradition, history and historical aspects of study. Classes focus on etiquette, formalities, hierarchy and respect. There may also be cultural tie-ins around festivals, special days and celebrations – dragon dancers are always kung fu students, for example. Traditional styles (some of which are also combative) include Aikido, Okinawan Karate, Kung Fu, Capoeira, Ninjutsu, Wing Chung, Tai Chi, Daito Ryu, Kendo, Gatka.

**Combat:** Combat-based styles focus on practical fight skills, sparring, self defence, and fight science. Emphasis is often on "Randori" (one-on-one sparring) Styles include Coreeda, Boxing, Jujitsu, Hapkido, MMA, Krav Maga, Jeet Kun Do, Arnis, Savate, Pankration

There are so many martial arts schools, how do you pick which one? Remember within each martial art there are MANY versions, and often only one version will have access to international competitions such as the Olympics – so parents with ambitions should choose the school and its connections carefully.

### **Grading of styles and the famous 'black belt'**

Everybody has heard of the famous "black belt" (or black sash, glove) which is meant to signify ultimate mastery. But what does a black belt actually mean? A black belt means different things in different styles and the grading is not necessarily the same between arts, styles, or even within some organisations.

Some styles will let you obtain your black belt in under three years – others will take over ten years. Some styles let you obtain them online!

I am an old-fashioned instructor. I don't believe in giving out black belts unless the wearer is over 16 and can defend themselves in a street-realistic attack / pressure test. As an instructor, it is my duty to give students the skills they require and faith in their abilities. That said, some styles giving a black belt to a five year old can signify an excellence and understanding in something such as kata. It does not always signify adult-level skills.

## Choosing a style for your child

When choosing an instructor and style, consider:

- Your child's personality & body type
- The instructor
- Your budget
- The commitment you are willing to make - training only once a week will not get the results you seek - like ANY sport, a student needs to train twice a week. *For example in soccer or hockey, students have a training session and then a game, every week. That's two sessions.*
- Martial arts is a long term commitment. You'll be attending weekly for at least five years if you want to see a black belt. **It's totally worth it.**

## Working with your child's personality

Weigh up whether your child enjoys active, noisy classes, or a more restrained structured class, and seek that environment. Consider their ability to concentrate, how competitive they are, their flexibility and their creativity.

- Super flexible kids will love Tae Kwon Do, Hapkido, Kung Fu too.
- Strong kids are suited to Judo, Shotokan Karate and BJJ
- A child who likes personal space will hate grappling styles like Jujitsu, but will be suited to Karate
- Sport martial arts are great for competitive kids who win trophies – but make sure the message is that self worth comes from within
- Creative children are well-matched with traditional non-sport styles that focus on things like kata/ forms or traditional weapons
- Athletic kids will **love** judo but will also love Hapkido, Kung Fu, Jujitsu, BJJ and Capoeira
- Serious, focused kids will adore Kendo and Aikido as classes are structured, with a clear hierarchy and focus on history and tradition

## Choosing an instructor

After finding the right style, you need the right instructor to nurture and guide your child's learning.

**Top Tip: Figure out if YOU like the instructor. If you don't feel they're the right fit, trust your instincts.**

**Visit the school, see classes in action.** Look at how the instructors interact with the kids and the kids themselves. Is everyone focused, or lots of mucking about with a few star pupils at the front making everyone look great? Ask the same questions you would ask yourself when visiting a primary or high school.

**Are instructors experienced and educated?** Just because you \*learn\* a martial art does not mean you know how to teach it. Do the younger instructors have the emotional maturity to deal with difficult students, assess potentially dangerous situations or understand when a child is afraid or nervous?

**Howe is the learning journey managed?** What motivation is offered when a child hits a plateau and wants to drop out? Does the instructor support the parent and child while the plateau is worked through? Of course it is also the work of parents to keep their kids going even when they do not want to go – but you need support from the instructor as well.

## Your wallet

Many commercial dojos have introduced 12 month contracts and the fortnightly billing model. New members get pulled in with offers of a free uniform or a free month's worth of training. The thing is, nothing is ever really for free, so you are paying that back somewhere! What are you paying for?

- Look carefully at a contract if you are being asked to sign one
- Check for hidden costs: Will you be charged for every single belt-test, every patch and every belt on a regular basis?
- Consider enrolling in a system that is less progress-focused and more skill focused (potentially you'll save a lot of money)
- Take advantage of free trials - actual free trials that don't require a sign up. Do as many free lessons at as many venues as you need until you find the right fit for you.

## Insurance, first aid and child protection

**One of the most important aspects, often overlooked ; check the school has child safety, insurance and first aid certification for ALL instructors.** That way, you know your child is off to a good start.

In Australia, it is called the WWCC - Working with Children Check. There are also

police checks and child safe certification in other countries around the world. This is not an exhaustive list by all means, but these are really important aspects a parent or prospective student should ensure a martial arts school has policies for and enforces them properly.

### **A school should be able to show you;**

- Every instructor has first aid training including CPR & Anaphylaxis training, a functional first aid kit with a general use epi pen. Bonus points for dojos where instructors have been taught strapping for ankle injuries which by far are the most common. The first aid kit should also contain strapping tape and there should be ice packs in the fridge.
- Every instructor 18+ years has a current, valid WWCC or police check
- Adults/ older teens who are not instructors should not be liasing or mixing with minors and should certainly not be changing in front of them - unbelievably this is really common.
- The dojo should have a clear social media policy - children should not be following instructors / vice versa. Minors are minors and should be treated as such. Just like in a primary or high school.
- The dojo is insured with both public liability (for accidents that can, and do happen) and professional indemnity (to protect instructors) and you should know what that policy covers. In Australia, it only covers the ambulance and some basic things not covered by Medicare, and is enshrined in law.
- Appropriate safety gear is worn and enforced for activities that could result in injury - for example mouth guards, sparring gear, head guards.
- There is a clear and enforced student - instructor ratio. One instructor per 15 kids is a safe place to start. The second instructor may not be a black belt but having a second set of eyes is paramount.
- Toilets are safe and accessible, and there is a clear line of sight to the toilets (or change rooms) - if not, children should be attending in pairs, particularly if toilets are not in the same room or floor as the martial arts school
- The school should have a clear policy of pick up and drop off. Are kids wandering around outside waiting for parents, or kept where instructors can see them until they are collected?

### **In conclusion**

Now you have the road map to get started, remember, don't be discouraged if you don't find the perfect school first go. Keep trying. Studying a martial art will absolutely change the way you or your child feel about yourselves.

