

To Mom and Dad

A letter to parents - from an old martial art teacher - about martial arts lessons and children.

By Tom Callos

I'm going on 50 years old, which really isn't that old, but to talk to you about what a child, your child, stands to learn from taking martial arts lessons, it's old enough. I took my first lesson at the age of 9, received my first degree black belt at 19, and this year I will celebrate my 30th year of teaching and assistant teaching the martial arts.

I'm going to condense my experience into a few hundred words for you; the goal is to give you the 30-year perspective on what I have learned as a result of my training - and what I know your child will learn, should you decide to make the martial arts a part of his or her life.

In some ways, martial arts schools are all the same. Each school is going to be contained in some kind of space, like a shopping mall, a free-standing building, a room in a gym, in an office building, a garage, or maybe on a stretch of lawn in a park or in someone's backyard. What makes a martial school great is not the space it is in, although as parents we want the school to be clean and safe; what makes or breaks a martial arts school is the people that fill that space.

Here lies the primary reason to enroll - and then keep - your child in martial arts lessons, from the moment they first meet the age requirements of a school, until they leave your nest: The people.

The teachers (and students) in a martial arts school become leaders, heroes, role models, and friends to your child; and while martial arts teachers, like every kind of teacher, have their various strengths and weaknesses, their influence and friendship is worth every penny you will ever spend on tuition, times 10. I remember my teachers, I remember the senior students in my classes, I remember my classmates and the students who joined after me. I remember when I was 12-years-old and a red belt student, a man in his mid 20's, told me, nonchalantly, that "practice was the key to being a great martial artist "or a great anything." I can hear his voice as if he told me that yesterday - and the advice has shaped my life. My father probably told me the same thing a 1000 times, but who listens to their parents until much later in life? A martial arts teacher is a real man or woman; they're not heroes fabricated by the entertainment industry. These are real people that will be there, in their classes, day after day, patient, persistent, and persuasive. Their message is about consistent effort, about perseverance, about focus and goals and defense and self-control. Even teachers who can't speak English can, with an uncanny ability delivered through their coaching, translate values and powerful and life-changing ideas to their students. The kind of education a good martial arts teacher provides a young person is different from anything they will learn in grade school, from parents, or from football, soccer, or gymnastics coaches. The magic that forms in the long term relationship between a martial arts teacher and his or her students makes them an incredibly valuable, but all too often unacknowledged, part of "the village" that can help raise your child to be confident, self-disciplined, resilient, and resourceful.

Literally thousands of adults have told me, long after they stopped practicing the martial arts, what a powerful and positive influence their martial arts teacher was, and still is, in their life. I concur. Even the teachers that I came to think were inadequate, when I look back, I realize were a gift. I owe them all a huge debt of gratitude for helping me develop respect for my self and others, for helping me build my body, develop my coping skills, and for the confidence their constant attention and direction gave me. It took me a long time to understand the value of their friendship, but oh, now, I so completely get it. What a blessing! I would hope that every child would have the chance to interact with teachers like I had, men and women who coached and fixed and taught and laughed and yelled and, as I now understand, loved.

The second most valuable reason to have your child studying the martial arts, any style, any method, is the philosophy that goes with the training. Every style, every teacher of any skill, has something positive to teach your child. Some, of course, do it much better than others, but whether they know it or not, they are imparting wisdom of the most extraordinary kind and at a time in a child's life that they really need it.

I can still hear my teacher's words:

"Eyes straight ahead! Focus!"

"It's ok to be afraid, just don't let it stop you from moving and trying!"

"What are the two qualities of a champion?"

We would answer, shouting, "Attention to detail and follow through, sir!"

"Real bravery isn't found in fighting! It's found in not fighting!"

"Attention! Pay your respect!"

Pay your respect, indeed. Mom, Dad, every lesson is important and it's worth every penny, every minute you spend convincing your son or daughter that going to class that day is better than watching TV; it's worth every bump, bruise, stubbed toe, and every tear.

The good times, the victories, the understanding of the value of finally breaking through a barrier, the friendships, the little kids, the teenagers, the parents, and the old folks - it's so good, so very worthwhile, and so needed in today's world, that I had to write you about it. I had to encourage you "and try to give you the big-picture perspective on the martial arts. If you can swing it, get your child into a martial arts school and keep them there, even when they don't recognize the value of what they're doing. **They will, someday.**

#### About the Author

Tom Callos is a consultant to martial arts instructors, currently helping teachers to work environmentalism, anger management, kindness and leadership training into their schools.