

The Hi-Yah Effect: How Karate Affects the Mind and Body



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“Bow to the flag, your parents, your teachers, and each other. Kneel and meditate.”

This is the typical way to start off a karate class at MetroWest Martial Arts and Wellness Center, no matter the age or rank. I’ve been taking karate for over five years now, and am a fourth degree junior black belt, slowly working my way up to first degree senior black belt. On my first day of karate, I was told the three rules of Shaolin Kempo Karate: Self-Discipline, Respect, and Self-Confidence. By my first week, I was able to recite each and their definition: self-discipline is doing what you’re supposed to without being told, respect is treating others the way you’d want to be treated, and self-confidence is believing in yourself and achieving your goals. But back then, these were just words instilled in my brain; words with no meaning. I want to learn about how karate benefits us and if these words really do help us in succeeding in life.

So how does karate really benefit the body? Does it teach kids to be more violent? Or does it help us feel more safer, knowing that we can defend ourselves? And how does doing karate help us mentally? Does karate help us feel more relaxed? Does it help us academically? Does taking karate help reduce stress? How does it affect our self-esteem? Most importantly, can taking karate help instill self-discipline, respect, and self-confidence in the mind and in our actions?

I started my search about the martial arts and the psychological, or mental impacts, on a person. I found the article, “*Martial Arts and Mental Health*”, published by the journal *Contemporary Psychology*, and written by Iulius-Cezar Macarie and Ron Roberts

It named studies in which the effectiveness of martial arts on the body and mind had been “measured”, so to speak. The article mentioned a number of studies having to do with “Improvements in self-esteem”(1), “greater emotional stability and assertiveness” (1), and reductions in anxiety and depression (1). This source also mentioned a few studies focusing on the negative impacts, such as aggressiveness, due to martial arts. The article, unfortunately, very vaguely described the studies, providing me with only the last name of the scientist who had executed the experiment, and the year in which it had been done.

Also, I found out that there are two kinds of martial arts. One kind is the “hard”, and the other is the “soft”. What they mean by “soft”, is slow, steady motions, while focusing more on breathing. By breathing, I do not mean just simply taking air in and breathing it out, I mean inhaling through the nose, and exhaling through the mouth. This strategy works best if the martial artist exhales out twice the time that they have inhaled. Say I inhaled for 3 seconds. To steady my breathing, I would exhale for 6 seconds. These slow movement martial arts, such as Tai Chi, are meant to focus on building up the internal force, rather than the external. What the article means by “hard” martial arts is more forceful motions, exerting energy out, rather than building it up. Some examples of this would be Karate, Kung Fu, Jujitsu, and Tae Kwon Do. What distinguishes the “hard” martial arts from the “soft” is the way energy is used or generated.

Another interesting source I came upon was an article on Academic OneFile called [The Social-Psychological Outcomes of Martial Arts Practise Among Youth](#). This article was written by Jikkemien Vertonghen and Marc Theeboom, and published in the Journal

of Sports Science and Medicine in 2010. This article discussed how the effects of martial arts has been a controversial topic over many years.

Studies concerning the psychological effects of martial arts date back to the 1960s and 1970s. Only around 20% of these studies focused on children/adolescents. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, there has been more of a martial arts “hype”, especially concerning the youth. This has led to an increase in research about how martial arts may impact children. Comparing recent studies, it was found that over 60% of them regarded the effect of martial arts on children/young adults.

As a side note, this author expressed the difficulty to access these studies because only very few have been published and are accessible to the public. This makes it harder to find and compare the beneficial effects with the not-so-beneficial ones with quantitative data.

In this article, the author summarizes multiple studies based on different methods. Many of these studies have compared personality traits according to the performance level of martial artists. For example, comparing the personality of a child who has won a martial arts competition and won a trophy versus a martial artist who lost a competition. The majority of results summarized that a martial artist who won a competition and/or received a trophy, had significantly higher self confidence compared to a child who lost a competition. I relate this to other sports, and I think that this may be the science that may be behind the whole “everyone’s a winner” idea. This may be why they hand both peewee soccer teams trophies after a game, no matter if they won or lost. They probably give the children trophies to keep up their self-confidence.

Back to the studies conducted, it was also concluded that the “winners” reported more positive outcomes on personality traits than the “losers”. Another method some studies were conducted was by comparing differences in personality traits of martial artists between different teaching styles. This would include the traditional style of teaching versus more modern and revised styles of teaching. What these studies showed was that the children who were trained by the traditional martial arts styles acted more positive and self-confident, as opposed to the children who were taught using the more modern teaching styles. The author mentions that this may be due to the way of practice of traditional styles versus the modern styles. In traditional martial arts styles, the children emphasized more humility and their overall levels of hope and confidence were higher compared to those involved in modern martial arts.

Another source I found was also from Academic OneFile, and was called Martial arts as a mental health intervention for children? Evidence from the ECLS-K. This article was written by Joseph M. Strayhorn and Jillian C. Strayhorn and published in the journal, *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, in 2009. A study conducted to show the effect martial arts training may have on a child was thoroughly reported in this article.

The ECLS-K (Early Childhood Longitudinal Program, Kindergarten Class) study consisted of 21,260 children from public, Catholic, and non-Catholic private schools across the United States. The main purpose of this study was to examine the effect of martial arts upon change in classroom behavior from kindergarten to third grade and from third grade to fifth grade.

Participation in martial arts was measured through individual interviews conducted by research staff with parents of children in the project. First, the parents were presented with this question: "In the last 12 months, did {child} regularly get exercise through any of the following organizations?" Those who indicated that their children had gotten exercise then answered a following question: "What types of exercise or physical activity did {child} get at the places you just mentioned?" Then martial arts were specifically inquired about.

The measure of classroom behavior was a composite of questions on a questionnaire, the Social Rating Scale, which was derived from the Social Skills Rating System and completed by teachers during each wave of the study. Four questions constituted a self control subscale: respecting the property rights of others, controlling temper, accepting peer ideas for group activities, and responding appropriately to pressure from peers. Six involved "approaches to learning": attentiveness, task persistence, eagerness to learn, learning independence, flexibility, and organization. Five involved interpersonal skills: forming and maintaining friendships; getting along with people who are different; comforting or helping other children; expressing feelings, ideas, and opinions in positive ways; and showing sensitivity to the feelings of others. Five involved externalizing problem behaviors: the frequency with which a child argues, fights, gets angry, acts impulsively, and disturbs ongoing activities. Four involved internalizing problem behaviors: the apparent presence of anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness.

For the third and fifth grade administrations of this questionnaire, two items were added: an approach to learning item, "child follows classroom rules," and an externalizing

item asking about the frequency with which a child talks during quiet study time. Although there were only four items in the official self-control subscale, the entire scale is weighted very heavily toward items involving self-control. The items on this questionnaire highly resemble those of other questionnaires used by mental health professionals to assess children's psychological health.

Each question was rated on a 1 (never) to 4 (very often) Likert scale. Negative items' scores were subtracted from five, so that each item had a range where 1 was worst and 4 was best. To analyze this information, the researchers averaged the results of each question. The five subscales were each internally consistent at the outset: the split half reliabilities for the various subscales of the teacher ratings were high. For fifth grade, for example, the split half reliabilities ranged from .77 for internalizing to .91 for approaches to learning [9]. Furthermore, the correlations between these various subscales were reasonably high. In fifth grade, for example, the unweighted correlations ranged from .31 to .81; the average correlation was .56. These correlations appeared high enough to justify combining the items into one scale, measuring the favorableness of each child's classroom behavior.

The claims of martial arts studios and the expectations of many parents that martial arts will improve self-control and self-confidence contrast with the near-zero effect sizes found in these analyses. The strategy of enrolling elementary school aged children in martial arts training in order to improve self-control, self-confidence, concentration, and other mental health outcomes, as measured in classrooms by teachers, is supported by the above studies. Although there are studies that have concluded negative effects of

practicing martial arts, there may be other factors involved that are beyond the scope of this study. Overall, we see that karate can be beneficial to the mind and body, especially in young children.