

Need the Perfect Gift for a Hard-to-Please Teen? Try a Black Belt

by Mark Kennedy

Oh, I know you can't give someone a black belt, any more than you can give them a high school diploma or a college degree. But you can give them a nudge in the right direction along with the financial resources to make the journey. And the martial arts journey is a secret dream of a surprising number of teens and preteens. So if you're looking for the perfect gift for a hard-to-please teen or "tween"; if you want something they'll like which will also help them (and maybe you!) through a tough stage of their life, give them a martial arts membership!

It doesn't need to be extravagant, such as paying a whole year's dues. Three months, one month, or even one or two introductory lessons will do. After all, the quest for a black belt will take a few years, and can only be sustained through the internal motivation of the individual. No external motivation is going to last. But if the way is mapped out, if they are gently bumped into taking the first step, and if the destination is made tangible, they are more likely to begin. The complex chore of finding a school, talking to the adults there, breaking the news to parents or friends, and then getting the money together, can make it too overwhelming a task to attempt. If all this groundwork is done for them, though, a teen is much more likely at least to give it a try.

And there are solid reasons that go far deeper than the clich'd list we've all heard: discipline, self-defense, higher self-esteem, etc. Yes, with a good school and instructor, these can be true. But why? How? Here are seven can't-miss benefits of the martial arts.

Can't-Miss Benefit #1: A healthy alternative to electronics

Martial arts practice is a fun, healthy, natural hobby. It makes a good alternative to kids living inside a video game, computer, television screen or cell phone. The martial arts get kids up, moving, and noticing the world around them (actually a requirement, since awareness is 90% of self-defense). I won't trot out the statistics and details about child and adolescent illnesses, as in the areas of obesity, diabetes, ADD/ADHD, etc. You've heard them. But whatever concerns you may have for a teen's health, or their future health given present habits, practicing the martial arts is a good antidote. Martial arts practice (even home practice): helps to even out moods, especially important for teens who feel emotional highs and lows so passionately, and whose hormones are often raging (MA also produces endorphins); speeds up metabolism, which burns excess calories; acts as a natural anti-drug/alcohol agent (it's impossible to advance much in the arts when doing drugs or drinking); builds flexibility, endurance, and strength; increases red blood cell production; and lowers blood pressure. And this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Can't-Miss Benefit #2: Increased respect for self and others

Many kids, for a plethora of reasons, don't believe they are entitled to be respected and appreciated just for who they are for being themselves. Almost all kids have been teased by peers at some point about a "flaw", which turns into self-consciousness and can grow out of all proportion in the kid's own mind. This lack of self-respect and self-appreciation if left unchecked over time can manifest as either anger, or feelings of insufficiency. Through good martial arts instruction in a positive atmosphere, teens learn that they are neither more nor less "flawed" than anyone else. This healthy sense of self, that to be normal is not to be perfect, is an important element in the development and maturation of teens and preteens.

Can't-Miss Benefit #3: Learning to earn their way

There is a dangerous trend underway in many kids' basic outlook on life: that they are entitled to something for little or nothing. This attitude may be caused either by things coming to them too easily, or by things being too difficult. Perhaps they may feel like failures in one or more areas of their young lives: school, socially, sports, dating, or maybe embarrassment over some family or home situation (e.g., not as rich as the "rich" kids; not as poor as the "cool" kids). Over time, I've become convinced that the more kids find themselves feeling on the outs from success, the more

shortcuts will seem acceptable, even normal; and then the more easily they will give up on earning their way. I believe that as these teens work toward and earn martial arts achievements, they learn they can be successful the old fashioned way. They don't need shortcuts. They are capable. They learn to earn their way, and this instills confidence and pride of achievement.

Can't-Miss Benefit # 4: A rite of passage

Many indigenous cultures have rituals established whereby young people can prove they have earned the right to be seen as adults. Our "advanced" society has a gap here, especially for those teens extremely at risk of not transitioning into mainstream society. That is, those with little hope of on-time high school graduation, no vocational apprenticeship or schooling awaiting them, or little chance of or desire for college entrance, also have little hope of proving their worth to peers and adults. That is, they have no access to a culturally approved rite of passage into adulthood. This creates a vacuum during a very critical time/stage of life. Unfortunately, those who can find no traditional, socially-acceptable way to make this passage, may turn to such things as tagging/party crews or even gangs (with their initiation ceremonies), girls to pregnancy (proof of womanhood), boys to impregnating someone (proof of manhood), and either gender to "anti-approval" (vandalism, wreaking havoc in classes or at home, body piercings/ tattoos/bizarre hair and clothing styles). Earning their way up the belt ranking system (ideally all the way to black belt) offers a powerful rite-of-passage alternative for our teens and tweens.

Can't-Miss Benefit #5: Team work and etiquette

Many kids have had to scabble for respect from peers, have been teased as mentioned earlier, have had to compromise their true feelings in order to fit in, or have struggled and perhaps been made to feel inadequate in school. Any one of these situations can cause them by the preteen/teen years to have adopted an "each one for himself/herself, and forget the rest" survival mentality. Martial arts instruction and practice generally requires either a whole-class or two-person team format. In both cases, each student necessarily takes responsibility for the well-being of classmates and partners. To do less when practicing potentially dangerous techniques, would put others "who have become their friends" at risk. Wholesome martial arts instruction naturally counteracts any me-first attitude.

Can't-Miss Benefit #6: Increased safety in a dangerous world

While there is obviously nothing that can guarantee that our kids will always be safe and protected, the one who is better prepared will better respond to a sudden, dangerous situation, or even better handle a verbal assault or provocation. Stories abound of teenagers, many of them girls, who have fought off grown men attempting to attack them or family members. Again, this is not guaranteed to happen, but it is much more likely for those who have trained and prepared, mentally and physically.

Can't-Miss Benefit #7: Personal empowerment

The martial arts paradox is that those who know how to fight rarely need to do so. Learning to defend oneself takes away the need to "prove" ones toughness on the street, in the classroom, or at home. Learning martial arts is a counterweight to violence. In my almost 20 years of working with kids full time, I've found that bullies are often past victims of bullying; abusers are past victims of abuse; etc. So, we can promote the health of the kid who becomes a martial artist, as well as making them a beacon of anti-violence for their peers. In a sense, the presence of someone who refuses to become either bully or bullied, is a powerful force for their friends, acquaintances, siblings and classmates.

A personal note from my wife: How to find the right school/instructor

This topic really deserves a separate article, but my wife, an early-childhood specialist concerned for all children and parents, gently hinted that it would be less than helpful to leave you without some guidelines on how to choose a martial arts program. I have studied four Asian arts seriously over a dozen years in probably 8-10 settings, and have seen the best and the worst of schools and instructors. Here is how I would distill that experience and advise you to begin.

- How do you feel when you walk out the door of the studio for the first time, not what do you think, but how do you feel? Is it the right one or not?
- Is the would-be instructor for your teen a good fit? Or is he/she too demanding? Too sloppy? Too macho? Too competitive? Too young/old?
- Are the promises they make realistic, or are they trying too hard to sell you? And how long have they been there? You don't want a place that closes its doors as your teen is halfway to black belt.
- Is there a good balance between teaching self-defense (will it work?) and having fun?
- Will it promote health if your teen continues for years, even decades, or will it wear down joints? is it too youth-oriented, too dependent on external strength/size, or is it an art that can be practiced by anyone for a lifetime?

A kid's thrill at having a chance at a life-long dream "earning a black belt" may be the solution to your gift-giving dilemma, and your gift may have far-reaching benefits for someone you care about. I hope that if you've been wrestling with what to give a hard-to-please teen or tween, this article may help you to nudge them toward beginning a lifelong journey to better health, self-awareness and understanding, compassion and confidence.

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