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## **Character Development for Children in the Martial Arts** **by David M. Valadez**

If you enter the market of martial arts instruction for children in an attempt to find a school, you are immediately exposed to the idea of martial arts training being a practice that develops character. There is a history to this, now commonly unknown:

As martial arts practice vacated from the samurai lineages for social and economic reasons at the end of the feudal period in Japan, it entered the Modern era seeking cultural and financial support from the then burgeoning government. The arts sought this support by adapting themselves to the modern style of military training and warfare, and by marketing themselves as a viable way of developing good citizens for the increasingly fascist and imperialistic Japanese state. Entering the 20th century, the martial arts of Japan were heavily influenced by how exercise and fitness were being utilized internationally. In particular, the arts philosophically aligned themselves with the now-forgotten Muscular Christianity movement of pre-WWI Europe and the United States. By such alignment, the arts organized and institutionalized themselves according to the same models that came to influence the development of other equally famous, and/or now infamous, groups, groups such as the Boy Scouts of America, the Olympic Games, and the Hitler Youth. All of these groups, and others like them, held the common position that fitness, physical activity, and group organization, were not only good for the citizenry of the State in general, but that they were thus so because they were good for the moral character of the individual.

Fast-forward nearly a century ahead to the present, with this history so engrained in us that it can now be forgotten, and it is automatically assumed that martial arts training (as well as organized sports) develops character in children. So commonly assumed is this position that it is never asked why or how or by what means this is done. By this assumption, regardless of the school, or the teacher, or the pedagogy, or whatever the technology of the self is being employed, all are equally treated as a source for purifying character flaws and replacing them with virtues. However, this is an unwise position to take. For what we often think as a means for developing character can in fact be nothing more than a continuation of practicing a character flaw.

For example, take the current colored-belt ranking systems. While they serve political and institutional needs at a larger federation level, at the level of the individual practitioner, they function primarily as a means of external orientation and motivation. They are therefore meant to address the character flaws of short attention spans and an inability to be centered unto oneself. That is to say, such a system works to reify these flaws and to even make use of them for commercial, political, and institutional reasons. Should we then just adopt them without reflection, or can and should we ask: Out of two children, one that trains for the sake of perfection alone and requires not the distraction of short term goals to remain disciplined

and committed toward their endeavor, and one that needs to look outside themselves for distractions and measurements meant to tell them who and what they are, which one has more character, and which one do we want our own children to be? When asked, the answer is obvious.

These kinds of questions are important, because in them we can free ourselves from the assumptions of histories that now go unquestioned. Once free, we can then ask, “How do we produce good character in our children?” Make this a real “How?,” and you will serve your child well. Make this a real “How?,” and you will note that all character development comes from an exposure to a crisis and to an uncompromising expectation. The crisis involves the placing of the path of virtue along side the path of non-virtue, and the uncompromising expectation is that the child should choose the path of virtue repeatedly, easily, quickly, and even under the most stressful of situations. With children, of course, the crisis must remain both repeatable and reversible, but the expectation must remain uncompromising. With children, of course, the path of virtue must always be practiced incrementally and prior to the crisis being set in place. Nevertheless, for a lot of children, this is not always fun. It is, however, always rewarding.

Such training has nothing to do with entertainment, or with distraction, or with superficial investment, things that so commonly populate the dojo of today. Please keep this in mind as you look to have your child gain full dojo membership at Senshin Center. And, please keep this in mind as your child comes to you wanting to skip class or quit training after they have called themselves my deshi. Know that what you are seeing at such a time is the placing of the path of virtue by the path of non-virtue. Help your child choose wisely: Disengagement, cowardice, avoidance, a lack of discipline and/or commitment, especially when things are getting tough, these are not of the Path of the Warrior.