

What is the best age for a child to start a Martial Art?

As a Kung Fu Master, I regularly get phone calls from parents of children as young as three, five, seven, inquiring about Martial Arts classes for their child. My own feeling, as a parent, has always been that this is far too young.

However, parents seem reluctant to believe me and I know that no sooner have I hung up the phone they will call another martial arts school to ask the same question until they find someone who will accept them.

Some parents like to think their child is the exception, and believe that they will not only continue to practice as long as the parent would like them to, but also acquire all the benefits of martial arts, and fast:

Goal Setting; Confidence; Positive Mental Attitude; Self Esteem; Self Discipline; Respect; Integrity; Persistence and Focus.

Emotionally, at a young age, children are often clingy, showing fear of separation from parents, and they may show anger or violent outbursts, which would clearly be a problem. By the age of 4 children can usually play cooperatively with other children. Between 4 and 5, they can skip and jump and by 5 they can show responsibility and guilt and feel pride in accomplishments.

Up to 5 or 6 years old, a child has no real concept of future success; they just know what they want right now. The ambition usually comes from the parent, but what does the parent want for their child?

To enjoy an activity for a few months? To improve their coordination and confidence? To become a Master or have black belt ? To begin an activity for a lifetime? More important, what would those children, looking back as an adult, have wanted for themselves?

Physical aspects are relevant factors to be considered. For example, a child's head is proportionally large and their arms and legs short compared to an adult, making the proper execution of many moves almost impossible. As the child grows, changes in body proportions affect how techniques are performed. Also, changes in the relative size of the head in childhood affects the balance of the body during movement. These factors can slow down the progress of the younger child and although they catch up eventually, they may become bored in the process and give up.

Usually, at 10 - 11 years old, a child will start to enter into the "rebellious" teenage years. The sense of independence is often in battle with their self-esteem and awareness of their bodies. Parents seeking to help their children learn discipline, confidence, and keep them motivated in a healthy lifestyle will often start their children at this age in Martial Arts.

If you're looking for a sport or recreational form of martial arts for kids, practically any style or school will do. But, if you're a concerned parent who's looking for answers and a self defense education for your child, then you need to know what to look for.

In the years that I was teaching young children, at the West Island Chinese School in Montreal, I always was very clear to all parents: “They will learn a few kicks and punches, some simple techniques, but don’t expect anything else, we are playing Kung Fu, not in a formal practice at the gym.”

There are many other sports that your child could and should be doing that will give them much more at a young age. For a traditional and proper leaning of martial art, just wait until 11 years old. What is the rush?

Aspects of Child Development

Child development is the term used to describe the way that a child masters necessary skills to help it keep pace as it grows. In general terms the average child will develop in specific stages at specific times/ages. These are often known as 'milestones'. Often a child will need to reach a specific milestone before their body/brain has the building blocks to move on the next one. Let's take a look at some of the key areas of child development.

Physical development: Physical growth in stature and weight occurs over the 15–20 years following birth, as the individual changes from the average weight of 3.5 kg and length of 50 cm at full-term birth to full adult size. As stature and weight increase, the individual's proportions also change, from the relatively large head and small torso and limbs of the neonate, to the adult's relatively small head and long torso and limbs.

Motor development: Abilities for physical movement change through childhood from the largely reflexive (unlearned, involuntary) movement patterns of the young infant to the highly skilled voluntary movements characteristic of later childhood and adolescence. (Of course, older children and adolescents retain some reflex movements in addition to developing voluntary movement.)

Cognitive development – The capacity to learn, remember, and symbolise information, and to solve problems, exists at a simple level in young infants, who can perform cognitive tasks such as discriminating animate and inanimate beings or recognizing small numbers of objects. During childhood, learning and information-processing increase in speed, memory becomes increasingly longer, and symbol use and the capacity for abstraction develop until a near-adult level is reached by adolescence

Social and Emotional development - development here is all about how children manages their own behaviour and their behaviour around other people. So, for example, children will learn how to share at a specific age and they will learn appropriate behaviour such as when to smile.