

Decreasing Aggression in Children Using Therapeutic Martial Arts

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Abstract

The Therapeutic Martial Arts is a unique and innovative approach as an alternative therapy modality. It combines Eastern perspectives, philosophy and tradition of Martial Arts with the most effective psychotherapeutic techniques that have been tested over a span of the entire century. The Therapeutic Martial Arts program helps children and adolescents to experience therapeutic change through structure of the ancient art, group dynamics, and other therapeutic interventions such as dynamic, cognitive, behavioral, gestalt and meditation.

Participating in this program, students not only will be able to improve their physical conditioning, but also social skills, anger management, and awareness of their own actions, and effects towards other people. Students will also be able to improve their self-esteem, communication skills, performance in school, and reaction towards stressful stimuli.

Introduction

Martial Arts originated approximately 4000 years ago. Over its history the Art developed into many different systems and styles. Shaolin monks practiced Martial Arts as meditation and for self-enlightenment and later developed techniques of self-defense. In addition to a combat system, Japanese people practiced Martial Arts for self-respect and self-control. Historically, Martial Arts were taught and practiced as a combat system; partially as a self-defense, but mostly to defeat opponents during military engagements [1].

In the late 1800's and throughout the 20th Century, Martial Arts began making its way towards the West. When the Martial Art reached Europe the Americas, only physical aspects were appealing, and therefore, it began taking more aggressive form; however with eastern mysticism. Western philosophical view is different from Eastern philosophical view. Western approach is more competitive in nature. As a result, Martial Arts were viewed either as self-defense or a sport; however, retaining its basic principles and eastern mysticism.

Therapeutic Aspects

Since the late 1960's, practitioners of Martial Arts began seeing certain exercises as beneficial to their sense of self, community and mental and physical health in general. Health professionals began collecting data on different aspects of Martial Arts. Some collected on physical aspects, such as improvement of flexibility, reflexes, and general physical ability [2]. Others collected on data on neuropsychological aspects, such as improvement of concentration and Electroencephalograph wave activity [2]. Yet others collected data on mental health aspects, such as changes in mood, aggression, and self-esteem. These researchers found that practicing Martial Arts improves different abilities and general mental health in participants. Several health practitioners began using Martial

Arts in conjunction with different therapeutic programs. Tredeau, used Martial Arts techniques with Occupational Therapy with children who are suffering from cerebral palsy to improve balance, coordination, the use of the extremities, as well as self-esteem and confidence. She reported that participants improved their abilities by a significant margin.

Other professionals used Martial Arts with individuals dealing primarily with psychological issues [3]. Christie and McGrath, used the film "The Karate Kid" to help an eleven-year-old boy to deal with his aggression, and learn about issues of discipline, change, control and balance. In this case Martial Art was used as a metaphor. Researchers reported significantly positive results. Weiser et al. used Martial Art in conjunction with therapy to help a patient with some of his aggressive tendencies. In this application, the patient practiced Martial Art and attended therapy simultaneously. The researchers also report positive results.

Martial Arts Culture

Martial Arts has been depicted in the movies as an aggressively physical force that once learned, he or she can "destroy anything" from a person to a concrete block. From the layman perspective and a popular view, this may be viewed as just that. However, once in a Martial Arts class, or a Dojo (hall of practice), the picture begins to change after one or two months. There are several components that comprise the whole system of Martial Arts and its training that are not so obvious to the general public.

The Dojo environment that a student must attend to when practicing is a special place with its own set of rules, traditions, and behaviors. For example, Richman and Rehberg describe a belt system, which acts as token economy. They report that accomplishment of a rank improves self-esteem. James and Jones, report that wearing a uniform, bowing, *kiyaing* (screaming loudly), attending to specific rules and regimes, all play a part in the environment of Martial Arts.

Meditation is also a significant part of the practice. There have been numerous studies describing positive effects of meditation and the use of imagery as part of Martial Arts training and improvement of psychological abilities [4]. Martial Arts physical conditioning has been shown to help individuals to improve self-esteem. The relationship between the student and the instructor was also found to have a significant contribution to the culture of the Martial Arts. This research indicates how student perceives his or her instructor and the effectiveness of this perception.

Because of the popular Western perception, learning Martial Arts "will make you invincible" a student may feel "special" being in a Martial Arts school, or even the whole Martial Arts system.

Aggression

Different societies define aggression in variety of means, ranging from internal to expressive. Based on our research, we can define aggression as an external physical verbal expression of anger, a natural internal emotional state. Nosanchuk and Graham also postulated that there is a cognitive apparatus that can modulate aggression. Therefore, for the purposes of this program aggression may be defined as displacement of internal energy that is built up as a result of tension, anger, and frustration onto objects or people through overt or covert behavior and causes physical or psychological harm [5,6].

Martial Arts and Aggression

When a lay-person hears the term Karate, Kung-Fu, Judo, or names of related arts, he or she might make a reference to film stars such as Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, Jean Claude Van Dam or a recent competition that a friend or a relative attended. This reference might suggest some form of physical aggression. The characters in the movies are depicted

as defeating their opponent in some devastating fashion. Competing in a tournament may also suggest physical aggression to a spectator. However, the research has shown that when a student practices Martial Arts, the Aggression level is decreased; in fact, it is better controlled and displaced in an appropriate assertion. Other studies indicate that being a part of the Martial Arts culture, practicing meditation and physical conditioning also decreases levels of aggression. Therefore, results of these studies suggest the opposite to what is perceived by the general public. Those who practice Martial Arts, in fact decrease aggression both internally and externally.

Research Need

Although Martial Arts has been utilized in conjunction with different therapies, it has never implemented in a specific therapeutic program where the Martial Art is used as a structure and the environment and specific therapeutic techniques are applied within this structure. It is necessary to investigate how different aspect of behavior and mental health would improve through Therapeutic Martial Arts program. The focus of this program would be on decreasing aggression and displacing it through assertion or other socially accepted means. In addition, by applying therapeutic techniques, a student will be able to enhance coping skills to deal with some of the more complex psychological issues.

Although children and adolescents with emotional difficulties may be able to attend to the structure of a regular Martial Arts class, they may not be able to deal with psychological difficulties they experience. On the other hand, traditional therapy without the Martial will be beneficial; however, many of traditional modalities are less effective. However, being in a Therapeutic Martial Art program would be more effective for the children where the conventional therapy by itself may be less effective. In fact, the group receiving Therapeutic Martial Arts would demonstrate the lowest level of aggressiveness, whereas the control group shall demonstrate the higher level of aggressiveness.

Therapeutic Martial Arts Program

Therapeutic Martial Arts program is designed for children and adolescents (adults in the future) with mental health issues. Psychological difficulties range from social issues, peer pressure, being bullied, self-esteem, dealing with aggression, psychological and physical abuse, to more severe mental health ailment, such as bipolar, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, posttraumatic disorder and schizophrenia. Each group is designed around acuity and ages (two ages from the mean age). The program runs for approximately 9 months. Participants meet once per week for approximately an hour and a half. A treatment plan is designed to set goals and monitor progress. Components of each session would consist of meditation, exercises, Martial Arts techniques, and group therapy. The program would be implemented in a dojo (hall of practice) with all the appropriate attire and Martial Arts rituals. In addition, caregivers of participants will partake in a separate group to process issues that are related to each participant.

Therapeutic Techniques

A variety of psychological strategies will be used during group therapy. Each technique is evidence based and thoroughly researched for its effectiveness with the population in the group and aggression in general. Following clinical approaches are selected for the programs are: (a) meditation, (b) token economy (distribution of the certificates, belts, and special events), psychodynamic group therapy, social and cognitive techniques, and Gestalt techniques.

Relaxation/Meditation

Meditation is one of the most traditional exercises in Martial Arts. It has many therapeutic qualities and can be used to enhance concentration and awareness of internal and external perception [7,8]. In the study of 26 third grade school children, completed by Linden, attentiveness and concentration were significantly increased. Recent study supports previous results regarding improvement in concentration and focus [9,8]. Students begin and end each practice with another meditation.

Token economy: A chart is designed to maintain students' progress, providing feedback by awarding pluses (tokens) for psychological and physical successes. Throughout the program students are rewarded with certificates, which are earned each class, monthly, and every three months, as well as at the end of the program. Attaining success will qualify to earn special rewards, which include a special video, an additional certificate, going to observe a competition, competing, and attaining a higher belt.

Social and cognitive techniques: Throughout the treatment a variety of social and cognitive techniques would be applied. Some of these techniques are Assertiveness Skills Training, where students will be able to learn how to express their anger and frustration through more socially accepted achievement of their needs. Also, Problem Solving Training will emphasize using a set of cognitive skills when dealing with problematic situations [10]. Additionally, Systematic Rational Restructuring (SRR) focuses on creating a rational in analyzing irrational assumptions.

Gestalt: In order to create awareness of self and others the program focuses on three aspects of Gestalt therapy. Non-verbal awareness and communication of senses, gestures, and body language that is used to connect our physical senses to our emotional and cognitive expressions. The use of fantasy helps to project thoughts onto tangible objects. Through role-playing students are able to practice learned interpersonal skills in more realistic situations [11].

Group therapy: At the end of the class, a group discussion will engage students where they are able to share issues, give each other feedback, experience and play out roles, and create a greater awareness in interpersonal relations. An instructor then becomes a group facilitator. According to Yalom, group therapy is a unique modality to create interpersonal awareness and clarify roles that we portray in a healthier environment. Psychodynamic issues are discussed, such as parental and peer relations, anxiety, identity, conscious and unconscious motivation, and many others. At the end of each practice/therapy, students are able to choose who deserves a certificate for the day. This will help to increase cohesiveness and promote cooperation.

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