



Developing a Martial Arts Program to Meet the Expectations of Contemporary Parents

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Abstract

Background: In a fast-paced world, parents often search for extracurricular activities to allow children to develop life skills crucial for successful living in adulthood. Martial arts classes are generally considered a strong alternative due to their effectiveness in improving several physical and psychological skills. The present study proposed a systematical approach to martial arts classes to address physical and psychological skills in children and adolescents from 4 to 13 years old. In addition, this study aimed to determine the parental motivations for enrolling children in martial arts classes and to investigate their satisfaction with the proposed program in addressing their needs. *Material and Methods:* In this cross-sectional descriptive study, forty-six parents representing forty-six children participating in the proposed martial arts program responded to a single open-ended question asking their motivations for enrolling their children in martial arts classes. The Client Satisfaction Questionnaire-3 was used to obtain the degree of parental satisfaction with the program. *Results:* Findings revealed that parents recognized the improvement of self-defense and anti-bullying skills, self-confidence and self-esteem, and discipline and self-control as the top three reasons to enroll their children in martial arts classes. The Client Satisfaction Questionnaire-3 revealed high parental satisfaction with the proposed program in addressing their needs. *Conclusions:* It is possible to conclude that the proposed program met the parents' expectations and needs identified as the primary concerns in enrolling their children in martial arts. The relevance of meeting the parents' expectations is due to their crucial role in sustaining the children's involvement in sports. A well-structured program has the potential to satisfy parents, prolong the children's participation, and optimize the long-term benefits promoted by martial arts involvement.

Keywords: combat sports, jiu-jitsu, confidence, discipline, self-defense, anti-bullying

Developing a Martial Arts Program to Meet the Expectations of Contemporary Parents

In an ever-changing world, children have encountered fewer opportunities to develop life skills crucial for successful living in adulthood. Parents often search for extracurricular programs to address common matters, such as discipline, responsibility, self-control, focus, perseverance, resilience, confidence, self-defense, and fitness.

Sports are considered great options for extracurricular activities due to their significant and positive impact on concentration, cognitive and academic performance, life satisfaction (Becker et al., 2018; Errisuriz et al., 2018; Gu et al., 2019; Pancar, 2020; Yu & Song, 2022), and self-confidence, given the constant opportunities to face challenges, identify problems, find solutions, and make decisions (Bessa et al., 2021).

Martial arts classes are generally considered a strong alternative for cognitive and psychological development due to their effectiveness in improving one's executive function, academic performance (Giordano et al., 2021; Harwood-Gross et al., 2021), self-control, pro-social behavior (Blomqvist-Mickelsson, 2019), resilience, self-efficacy (Moore et al., 2018; Greco et al., 2019), grit (Lee et al., 2021; Lorenzo-Lima, 2023a), and mental strength (Lorenzo-Lima, 2023b).

Moore et al. (2018) found significant improvements in resilience and self-efficacy in 12 to 14-year-old students after a 10-week martial arts intervention with one class per week. Greco et al. (2019) also identified improved resilience and self-efficacy in students from 14 to 16 years old after a 12-week martial arts program with 1 class per week. Xu et al. (2022) found that martial arts practitioners demonstrated higher self-control and lower bullying behavior than non-practitioners. These studies suggest that martial arts training can serve as a great anti-bullying

intervention, as students reporting higher levels of resilience are less likely to engage in bullying behaviors or be bullying victims (Donnon, 2010). Moreover, Ye et al. (2022) found resilience to be a great predictor of higher life satisfaction and lower depression in college students.

With so many well-established benefits of martial arts classes, the present study first proposed a systematical approach to a grappling-based martial arts intervention to address physical and psychological skills in children from 4 to 13 years old. Second, to determine the parental motivations for enrolling children in martial arts classes. Third, to investigate parental satisfaction with the proposed program.

Methods

Program Development

The proposed program was developed to address common concerns anecdotally expressed by parents regarding their children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Simultaneously, the program emphasized fun factors due to their crucial role in attracting and maintaining children engaged in sports (Visek et al., 2015; Visek et al., 2020). Trying hard, positive team dynamics, and positive coaching were the top three fun factors identified by Visek et al. (2020). The pilot edition was launched on February 5, 2021, and completed on May 15, 2021. The program was developed as presented below:

Season and Enrollment: Each season lasts 15 weeks, with two 55-minute weekly classes. Parents have anecdotally favored the two classes per week to facilitate the children's involvement in additional extracurricular activities such as team sports, music classes, and tutoring. The purpose of providing a beginning and an end date for the season aimed to increase engagement and consistency from parents and children in addition to providing pre-planned break periods

throughout the year. Three enrollment periods are offered in a calendar year to overcome common martial arts coaching challenges and optimize the students' progression. Enrolling new students throughout the year can impose a coaching challenge, possibly affecting the students' motivation. Generally, new students need to be brought up to speed at the expense of holding advanced students back while doing so.

Age Group, Attendance, and Coaching Staff: The program was divided into three age groups (4 to 6, 7 to 9, and 10 to 13 years old) to respect the children's cognitive, psychological, and motor development. The age restriction serves as an approach to regulate parental expectations and prevent comparison with children in different developmental stages (Lorenco-Lima, 2019). Classes were run with one coach for every 2-5 students to optimally guide and instruct the students, with a higher coach/student ratio for younger children. Students were required to participate in at least 24 classes (80%) to qualify for graduation, optimize progression, and improve parental accountability.

Motor Development and Physical Fitness: Based on the program's age group falling within the fundamental movement phase (2-7 years old) and the specialized movement phase (7 – adulthood) as proposed by Gallahue et al. (2012), the skills- and health-related components emphasized during classes included agility, balance, coordination, muscular and cardiovascular endurance, and strength (Lorenco-Lima, 2019). These skills are developed through age-appropriate exercises such as agility ladder drills, running activities, calisthenics, and martial arts-specific techniques (i.e., takedowns, sweeps, and escapes) and skills (i.e., hip escape, break fall, and rolls).

Program Progression and Curriculum: The proposed program comprises nine levels implemented over three years. Initially, children do not engage in live grappling as the program

emphasizes developing the motor skills necessary for executing the martial arts techniques and head safety (i.e., break fall skills and neck strength). This measure is adopted to increase the child's longevity in martial arts by progressively increasing their tolerance to falls and pressure. The curriculum was developed to provide a progressive structure for students to learn Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, Judo, Wrestling, and Muay Thai elements. Additionally, it focuses on progressively increasing cognitive, psychological, and motor demands while enabling small victories to develop self-esteem, self-confidence, perseverance, resilience, and mental strength (Leonard et al., 2021; Lorenzo-Lima, 2023b). Coaches encourage students by praising the process and effort when children achieve the expected milestones (Dweck, 2006; Leonard et al., 2021).

Class Plan (no live rounds): This class plan was implemented for the first 30 weeks for the 4- to 6-year-old group and the first three weeks for the 7- to 9 and 10- to 13-year-old groups. Classes were planned as follows: 1) line up and bow in (0-5 minutes); 2) warm up focused on the development of agility, balance, coordination, endurance, and strength (5-15 minutes); 3) martial arts specific technical development following the "tell, show, do" approach (15-45 minutes); 4) game-based learning (45-55 minutes); and 5) cool down, meditation and bow out (55-60 minutes).

Class Plan (with live rounds): This class plan was implemented starting on week 31 for the 4- to 6-year-old group and starting on week 4 for the 7- to 9- and 10- to 13-year-old groups. Classes were planned as follows: 1) line up and bow in (0-5 minutes); 2) warm up focused on the development of agility, balance, coordination, endurance, and strength (5-15 minutes); 3) martial arts specific technical development following the "tell, show, do" approach (15-40 minutes); 4) live grappling rounds (40-50 minutes); 5) game-based learning (50-55 minutes); and 6) cool down, meditation and bow out (55-60 minutes).

Educational Tools: To address common emotions during martial arts classes such as fear and frustration, in the commitment pledge sheet, children were asked in an age-appropriate manner to make the connection between challenging situations during classes with their favorite superhero or admired person. For example, "I understand that some classes will be hard, but these hard classes will make me as brave and tough as my favorite superhero or admired person)." This tool was developed based on the findings of White et al. (2016), who determined that children would persevere longer when working on a task when self-distancing and role-playing as their favorite superhero or a famous character. To address the limits, rules, and required discipline during classes, the boundaries board visually indicates the accepted and unaccepted behaviors and the potential consequences for the infractions. The consequences for unacceptable behaviors were age appropriated and addressed proximal to the issue, as Cloud and Townsend (2001) recommended. Gamed-based learning in the form of risky play was explored at the end of classes and, due to risky play's positive association with well-being, finish practice on a light and positive note (Sando et al., 2021).

Participants and Procedures

This cross-sectional descriptive study relied on data collected through a convenience sample of parents with children enrolled in the first and second seasons of 2023 of the proposed martial arts program conducted at Milestone Martial Arts in Las Vegas, Nevada. Participants were informed about the present study through flyers from April 17 to April 29, 2023, and from June 12 to June 24, 2023. After consenting to the study, participants were asked to complete a pen-and-paper questionnaire to express their motivations and experiences with the proposed martial arts program. Parents were informed that participation was voluntary, with no consequences for abstaining. The forms were left in a designated space where participants could

answer the questions privately and anonymously. A safe box was implemented to secure privacy when returning the questionnaire. No compensation was offered to the participants.

Forty-six parents (26 males and 20 females) ranging from 30 to 64 years of age (39.60 ± 8.46) responded to the questionnaires. Participants' responses reflected their experiences with their children's engagement in the program, with 46 children (31 males and 15 females) aged from 4-13 years old (7.65 ± 2.71) with 2.60 ± 1.76 15-week seasons completed.

Materials

Parental Motivation: Parents responded to a single open-ended question asking their motivations for enrolling their children in martial arts classes. The researcher then grouped the answers into pertinent categories, expressing the participants' motivations and aiming to eliminate duplicate responses.

Client Satisfaction Questionnaire-3 (CSQ-3): Parental satisfaction with the program was obtained through the 3-item Client Satisfaction Questionnaire on a self-reported 4-point Likert scale due to its high internal consistency (Larsen et al., 1979). The items were scored from 1 to 4, with 4 representing high satisfaction.

Statistics

Descriptive statistics were presented as mean, standard deviation, and percentage.

Results

Table 1 presents the parental motivations for enrolling their children in martial arts classes. A total of 69.57% of parents appointed self-defense and anti-bullying skills, 56.52%

appointed self-confidence and self-esteem, and 54.35% appointed discipline and self-control as personal motivation to have their children enrolled in the program.

Table 1

Parental Motivation to Enroll Their Children in Martial Arts

Motivation	Responses	Percentage (%)
Self-Defense and Anti-Bullying Skills	32	69.57
Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem	26	56.52
Discipline and Self-Control	25	54.35
Pro-Social and Community Interactions	24	52.17
Physical Health and Fitness	24	52.17
Overall Character Development	14	30.43
Focus and Attention	8	17.39
Mental Health	7	15.22
Respect Others	4	8.70

Table 2 presents the results of the CSQ-3 expressing parental satisfaction with the proposed martial arts model. Parents scored 3.74 ± 0.49 when asked to what extent the program has met their needs, $3.87 \pm .34$ when asked how satisfied they were with the service they received, and 4.00 ± 0.00 when asked if they would return to the program.

Table 2

Client Satisfaction Questionnaire-3 Regarding the Program

Items		Mean	SD
CSQ1	To what extent has the program met your needs?	3.74	0.49
CSQ2	In an overall, general sense, how satisfied are you with the service you received?	3.87	0.34
CSQ3	If you were to seek help again, would you come back to this program?	4.00	0.00

Discussion

This study proposed a systematic approach to martial arts classes to address the needs of contemporary families. Parental motivation and satisfaction were collected from parents based on the understanding that family members are credited with contributing the most to an individual's athletic performance (Donohue et al., 2007). Parents' perception and satisfaction

with the effectiveness of the program in addressing their needs must be aligned to extend the children's engagement with martial arts. When the parents' perception is not aligned with their needs, parents may redirect their time and financial commitments to a different activity and shortcut all benefits associated with long-term martial arts practice (Pujzo et al., 2019; Lorenc-Lima, 2023a).

Parents identified as the top three reasons to enroll their children in martial arts: the improvement of self-defense and anti-bullying skills, self-confidence and self-esteem, and discipline and self-control. Blomqvist-Mickelsson (2022) found self-control, responsibility, respect for the elderly, and acting gender-appropriately as the main motivations of parents with children enrolled in martial arts. Although identifying self-defense as a congruent parental interest, the additional differences between Blomqvist-Mickelsson's (2022) findings and the current study can be explained by the cultural differences between samples (North American versus European).

Based on the responses to question 1 of the CSQ-3, "To what extent has the program met your needs?" parents indicated strong satisfaction with the programs meeting their needs. Question 2 revealed a strong overall parental satisfaction with the services received. Question 3 determined that 100% of parents would return to the program. Therefore, the proposed program has successfully addressed the parents' motivations and needs identified in this study. The positive responses regarding the program meeting the parental needs can be further explained by previous studies showing the effectiveness of martial arts improving self-esteem (Fabio & Towey, 2018; Pujzo et al., 2019), self-control (Blomqvist-Mickelsson, 2019; Xu et al., 2022; Invernizzi et al., 2023), prosocial behavior (Rassovsky et al., 2019), physical fitness (Lorenc-

Lima et al., 2020), attention (Ng-Knight et al., 2022; Fabio & Towey, 2018), and mental health (Fabio & Towey, 2018; Ye et al., 2022).

This study presents some limitations. First, the limited convenience sample may offer a self-selection bias, preventing the generalizability of the parental motivations and consumer satisfaction findings. Second, the cross-section nature of the study prevents any causality assumptions. The author suggests future studies to address parental satisfaction longitudinally through pre- versus post-scores.

In conclusion, the proposed martial arts program was found to be a satisfactory tool for improving several parental motivations in children from 4 to 13 years of age, as demonstrated by the results of the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire. These findings contribute to the educational field as an alternative to conventional education methods aiming to improve physical and psychological skills in children and adolescents.

In practice, although extremely beneficial for the children's development, a drawback of the presented program is the requirement of many instructors per class, particularly in the 4- to 6-year-old group. This requirement imposes a challenge in finding instructors with personalities compatible with teaching young children. Two highlights of the program are the age group divisions and the exclusion of live rounds during the first two levels in the 4- to 6-year-old group. The age group division facilitated the content design and explanation to groups in a similar developmental stage. Removing live rounds, practicing numerous break-falls, takedown repetitions promoted a safer environment. Children were given enough time to develop neck strength, prevent potential head injuries, and become familiar and more comfortable with the close contact pertinent to a grappling-based martial arts program.

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