

## Never too young

Toddlers learn Karate, life lessons, in dojo

by David Rosales

The most frequent scene when one enters a martial arts "dojo" is groups of people kicking, punching or grappling with frowns of concentration and effort, shouting husky syllables in front of a mirror. Of course they're having fun and learning something they like, but the seriousness — inevitable in martial arts — hides the signs of enjoyment.

Watching the Karate Kitties class in Dawn Barnes' Karate Kids facilities in Redondo Beach is a whole different experience.

Playful music fills the air. The students — toddlers from 20 months to three-and-a-half years — are laughing out loud, their tiny teeth shining as they clap and jump and crawl through tunnels. The children attack obstacles with their little feet while holding the hands of their elders, punching and kicking bags and pads with more curiosity than aggressiveness.

It's like a kindergarten classroom, but happier, because even the classes look merrier than recess. Adults can be envious: martial arts practice is more fun than it could ever be for grown-ups.

Masters are smiling, something almost never seen in the severe discipline of any dojo, where pictures of the great past masters and the faces of the living are always stone-cold-concentrated.

Yes, kids are playing, but also learning and preparing to be as great as those who train under more severe discipline. "They're improving their balance, coordination and patience," said instructor Meghan Atwater. "We are teaching them how to bow and take turns, things that would be fundamental in their future not only as martial artists but in their social life."

The program was designed by Atwater, a licensed school teacher, along with Dawn Barnes, a third-degree black belt in Shotokan Karate and the founder of Dawn Barnes Karate Kids. Barnes has established seven academies throughout the LA area and has two decades of experience in teaching martial arts.

"We saw the youngest children copying the movements and stances of their elder siblings, and we thought that they could learn some principles of karate at their very early age," said Barnes.

Karate also represents a novel way to help children become more physically active. Instead of kicking villains in a video game or passively watching endless hours of action movies, Karate Kitties becomes part of the action.

"I've tried a lot of things to make my children exercise," said Maggie Hirai, whose two sons Andrew and William are training at the Redondo Beach Karate Kids. "This is a great experience for me and for them. They're having fun and a great workout, and so am I."

The joyfulness seems contagious. While talking about her Karate Kitties students, Atwater's voice turns childish and she claps her hands as if she was still playing with the children — though they have already gone home with their mothers.



Sensei Alec and fellow Karate Kitties instructor Meghan Atwater teach a student the "path of the empty hand." Photo by David Rosales



A young karate disciple at work. Photo by David Rosales

"They have so much energy," she said. "I love them!"

"If they continue practicing Karate, they will have a lot of advantages," Atwater said. "My son Kyle, who is 8, started like them. And now he's a brown belt."

There is story about a 30-year-old man who went to a Japanese dojo to learn Aikido. He felt bad because he didn't feel as young as he was in his 20s. He worried he didn't have the flexibility or reflexes that he had 10 years ago.

He entered the dojo and saw an 80-year-old man jumping on the

mat. He approached the elder man and said: "Master, will you take me in and teach me?"

"I'm sorry, I can't," the man answered.

"It's because I'm too old?" the younger man asked.

"No," the older man said. "It's because I'm just a student. This is my second class."

The Karate Kitties program represents the opposite side of the story: nobody is ever too young to start his or her path in martial arts. **ER**