

Teaching Taekwondo or the Martial Arts to Students with Special Needs

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OTHER RESOURCES:

[Teaching TaeKwon-Do to Students with Mental and/or Physical Limitations by Karen Cohn](#)

[Adaptive Martial Arts for Special Needs](#)

[AAU Special Needs Taekwondo](#)

[Special Needs Taekwon-Do](#)

[Taekwondo helps students with Special Needs](#)

[Sensory Taekwondo](#)

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Some day, as a Martial Art instructor you may have the opportunity of working with students with [special needs](#) in your dojang/dojo. For some instructors this would be a pleasure, for others it would be an endeavor of honor. You may need accommodations for some students and modifications for others. The accommodations could be a device, material or other support that could enable the student with special needs to accomplish the task and the modification could be a change to the instruction, decrease in the course outcome or content. Providing for the needs of students with special needs will be one of your greatest challenges as a martial arts instructor.

Although teaching martial arts in the “traditional sense” has been taught by rote, it can and I feel should be taught to the student’s individuality. Taekwon-Do spread throughout the world (martial arts in general as well) because it can be taught in large single group exercises, however, it was originally taught in very small and private groups, sometimes one on one or from father to son, master to single student. An example of this is in the book *Karate-Do My Way of Life* (Kodansha International 1975) by Funokoshi, Gichen (Shotokan Karate founder, and great grandfather of most Korean martial arts like Taekwon-Do) said “*At that time the practice of karate was banned by the government, so sessions had to take place in secret, and pupils were strictly forbidden by their teachers to discuss with anyone the fact that they were learning the art.*” An interesting foot note is that later, during the Japanese occupation of Korea, martial arts too would be banned.

Students with a Learning Disability

Students [that have a learning disability](#) are those who demonstrate a condition giving rise to difficulties in acquiring knowledge and skills to the level expected of those of the same age, especially when **not** associated with a physical handicap.

Following is a list of some of the common indicators of students that are learning disabled. These traits are usually not isolated; rather, they appear in varying degrees and amounts. A student with a learning disability may...

- **Is easily confused as compared to other students of same age group.**
- **Has a low tolerance level and a high frustration level.**
- **Has a weak or poor self-esteem.**
- **Is easily distracted.**
 - **Finds it difficult, if not impossible, to stay on task for extended periods of time.**
- **Is spontaneous in expression; often cannot control emotions.**
- **Has poor auditory memory—both short term and long term.**
- **Is verbally demanding.**
- **Has some difficulty in working with others in small or large group settings.**

This is a great reason to teach them privately and gradually work into a larger class environment.

- **Has difficulty in following complicated directions or remembering directions for extended periods of time.**

- **Has coordination problems with both large and small muscle groups.**
- **Has inflexibility of thought; is difficult to persuade otherwise.**
- **Has a poor concept of time.**

Teaching the student that is learning disabled will present you with some unique and distinctive challenges. Not only will these students demand more of your time and patience; they will require specialized instructional strategies in a structured environment that supports and enhances their learning potential. For this reason you may want to start them in private lessons or in a small group. It is important to remember that students that are learning disabled are not students who are incapacitated or unable to learn; rather, they need different instruction tailored to their own learning abilities. Use these appropriate strategies with students that are learning disabled:

- **Provide oral instruction for students with reading disabilities. Present tests and reading materials in an oral format so the test score is not unduly influenced by lack of reading ability.**
- **Provide students that are learning disabled with frequent progress checks and goals, this is one of the very few times, I would recommend a slightly more visual rank incentive (colored tape etc). Let them know how well they are progressing toward an individual and their class goal.**
- **Give immediate feedback to students with any learning disabilities. They need to see quickly the relationship between what was taught and what was learned.**
- **Make training concise and short. Long, drawn-out classes are particularly frustrating for a child that is learning disabled.**
- **Youngsters that are learning disabled have difficulty learning abstract terms and concepts (philosophical reasoning). Whenever possible, provide them with concrete examples and events. It may be best to leave philosophical teachings out until much later!**
- **Students with learning disabilities need and should get lots of specific praise. Instead of just saying, “You did well,” or “I like your work,” be sure you provide specific praising comments that link the activity directly with the recognition; for example, “I was particularly pleased by the way in which you performed your front kicks Michael.”**
- **When necessary, plan to repeat instructions or offer information in both written and verbal formats. Again, it is vitally necessary that children with learning disabilities utilize as many of their sensory tools as possible.**
- **Invite students of varying abilities to work together on a specific technique or toward a common goal. Be sure to consider personality compatibility at this level.**

Students with Higher Ability

Students of high ability often referred to as [gifted students](#), present a unique challenge to instructors. They are often the first ones done with their assigned techniques or those who continually ask for more and interesting techniques or patterns. They need exciting activities and

energizing physical and mental activities that offer a creative curriculum within the framework of the regular classroom instruction.

Characteristics of Gifted Students

Gifted students exhibit several common characteristics, as outlined in the following list. As in the case of students with learning disabilities, giftedness usually means a combination of factors in varying degrees and amounts. A gifted student may...

- **Has a high level of curiosity.**
- **Has a well-developed imagination.**
- **Often gives uncommon responses to common questions.**
- **Can remember and retain a great deal of information.**
 - **Can not only pose original solutions to common problems but can also pose original problems, too.**
 - **Has the ability to concentrate on a problem or issue for extended periods of time.**
- **Is capable of comprehending complex concepts.**
- **Is generally well organized.**
- **Is excited about learning new techniques and concepts.**
- **Is often an independent learner.**

Teaching Gifted Students

If there's one constant about gifted students it's the fact that they're full of questions and full of answers. Providing for their instructional needs is not an easy task and will certainly extend you to the full limits of your own creativity and inventiveness. Keep some of these instructional strategies in mind:

- **Keep the emphasis on divergent thinking—helping gifted students focus on many possibilities rather than any set of predetermined answers or technique responses.**

Three, Two, and One Step training I have found difficult at times, but let them explore the possibilities.

- **Encourage gifted students to take on leadership roles that enhance**

portions of the classroom structure (Note: some gifted students can be socially immature.) {Here again is one of the few times I would consider something of a “leadership portion” of your regular school curriculum}.

- **Provide numerous opportunities for gifted students to read extensively about subjects that interest them, especially ones that may have led them to take up the martial arts. Work closely with their parents to select and provide access to books in keeping with students' interests, especially if it's related to the martial arts they are learning. A great start on the history of the patterns in Ch'ang Hon (ITF)**

Taekwon-Do is Mr. Stuart Anslow's book: From Creation to Unification: The Complete Histories behind the Ch'ang Hon (ITF) Patterns.

Students Who Have Hearing Impairments

Hearing impairments may range from mildly impaired to total deafness. Although it is unlikely that you will have any hearing impaired students in your class, it is quite possible that you will have one or more who will need to wear one or two hearing aids. Here are some teaching strategies:

- **Provide written or pictorial directions.**
- **Physically act out the steps for an activity. You or one of the other students in the class can do this.**
 - **Place a hearing impaired child in line where he or she has a good field of vision of both you and any training aids used – ie; when kicking a handheld target.**
- **Many hearing impaired youngsters have been taught to read lips. When addressing the class, be**

sure to enunciate your words (but don't overdo it) and look directly at the hearing impaired student or in his or her general direction.

- **Provide a variety of multi-sensory experiences for students – IE; placing a fist on a target or slowly move their arm to block a punch also performed slowly. Allow students to capitalize on their other learning modalities.**
- **It may be necessary to wait longer than usual for a response from a hearing impaired student. Be patient**
- **Other Students can be responsible for taking notes on a rotating basis for hearing impaired students.**
- **Draw simple diagrams on a white board or chalkboard to show direction of techniques where applicable. Try to demonstrate what you are saying by using touchable items.**

Students Who Have Visual Impairments

All students exhibit different levels of visual acuity. However, it is quite unlikely that you will have students whose vision is severely hampered or restricted. These students may need to wear special glasses and require the use of special equipment. Although it is unlikely that you will have a visually impaired student in your dojang, it is conceivable that you will need to provide a modified instructional plan for visually limited students. Consider these tips:

- **Tape-record portions of books you want them to learn, like the Taekwon-Do Encyclopedia, and other printed materials so students can listen (with earphones) to an oral presentation of necessary material.**

- When using the whiteboard, use black ink and bold lines. Also, be sure to say out loud whatever you write on the board.
- As with hearing impaired students, it is important to place the visually impaired student close to the main instructional area.
- Provide clear oral instructions.
 - Be aware of any terminology you may use that would demand visual acuity the student is not capable of. For example, phrases such as “over there” and “like that one” would be inappropriate. Foreign words often used in the martial arts should be explained asking the student to pronounce them and translate – oral instruction is successful just as with sighted students.
- Partner the student with other students who can assist or help.

Students Who Have Physical Impairments

Students with physical challenges including amputations are those who require the aid of a wheelchair, canes, walkers, braces, crutches, or other physical aids for getting around. As with other impairments, these students' exceptional may range from severe to mild and may be the result of one or more factors. What is of primary importance is the fact that these students are no different intellectually than the more mobile students in your classroom. Here are some techniques to remember:

- Be sure there is adequate access to all parts of the classroom. You can use the Americans with

Disabilities Act for general guidelines.

- Encourage students to participate in all activities to the fullest extent possible.
- Establish a rotating series of “helpers” to assist any physically disabled students in moving about the room. Students often enjoy this responsibility and the opportunity to assist whenever necessary.
- Focus on the intellectual investment in an activity. That is, help the student use his or her problem- solving abilities and thinking skills in learning about a technique and it’s usage regardless of the students ability to perform it in the standard way.
- When designing an exercise or constructing training equipment, be on the lookout for alternative methods of presentation and performance.
- Students with physical impairments will, quite naturally, be frustrated at not being able to do everything the other students can accomplish. Be sure to take some time periodically to talk with those students and help them get their feelings and/or frustrations out in the open in one on one dialog. Help the student understand that those feelings are natural but also that they need to be discussed periodically.

Students Who Have Emotional Problems

Students with emotional problems are those who demonstrate an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships, develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems, exhibit a pervasive mood of unhappiness under normal circumstances, or show inappropriate types of behavior under normal circumstances.

Although you will certainly not be expected to re-mediate all the emotional difficulties of students, you need to understand that you can and do have a positive impact on students' ability to seek solutions and work in concert with those trying to help them. Here are some guidelines for your class:

- **Whenever possible, give the student a sense of responsibility. Put the student in charge of something (welcoming other students for class, watering the schools plants, helping with the lounge), and be sure to recognize the effort the student put into completing the assigned task.**
- **Provide opportunities for the student to self-select an activity or two he or she would like to pursue independently.**
- **Get the student involved in some training activities with other students— particularly those students who can serve as good role models for the student. It is important that the student with emotional impairments have opportunities to interact with fellow students who can provide appropriate behavioral guidelines through their actions. Special caution should be used in this regard.**
- **Discuss appropriate classroom behavior at frequent intervals. Don't expect students to remember in January all the classroom rules that were established in September. Provide “refresher courses” on expected behavior throughout the year - ie; dojang etiquette and ceremonial rules.**
- **Students with emotional impairments benefit from a highly structured program— one in which the sequence of activities and procedures is constant and stable. You will certainly want to consider a varied program for all your students, but you will also want to think about an internal structure that provides the support youngsters with emotional impairments need.**
- **Be sure to place a student with emotional impairments away from any distractions – ie; away from the entrance to the dojang floor or bathroom exit.**
- **Provide immediate feedback, reinforcement, and a sufficient amount of praise.**

Students Who Have AD/HD

Students with [Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder](#) (AD/HD) offer significant and often perplexing challenges for many instructors. AD/HD students comprise approximately 3 to 5 percent of the school-age population. This may be as many as 35 million children under the age of

18. Significantly more boys than girls are affected, although reasons for this difference are not yet clear. Students with AD/HD generally have difficulties

with attention, hyperactivity, impulse control, emotional stability, or a combination of those factors.

As you consider this list of signs of AD/HD, know that several of these traits must be present in combination before a diagnosis of AD/HD can be made. A student who has AD/HD ...

- **Has difficulty following directions.**
- **Has difficulty playing quietly.**
- **Talks excessively.**
- **Fidgets or squirms when sitting.**
- **Blurts out things.**
- **Is easily distracted.**
- **Often engages in dangerous play without thinking about the consequences.**
- **Has difficulty awaiting turns.**
- **Interrupts or intrudes.**
- **Doesn't seem to listen.**
- **Has difficulty paying attention.**
- **Has difficulty remaining seated.**
- **Often shifts from one activity to another.**

When working with AD/HD students in your class, keep the following in mind:

- **Make your instructions brief and clear, and teach one step at a time.**
- **Be sure to make behavioral expectations clear.**
- **Carefully monitor work, especially when students move from one activity to another.**
 - **Make frequent eye contact. Interestingly, students in the second row are more focused than those in the first.**
- **Adjust instruction time so it matches attention spans. Provide frequent breaks as necessary.**
 - **Provide a quiet work area where students can move for better concentration. Again private to semi private instruction could benefit them.**
- **Establish and use a secret signal to let students know when they are off task or misbehaving.**
- **Use physical contact (a hand on the shoulder) to focus attention.**
- **Combine both visual and auditory information when giving directions.**
- **Ease transitions by providing cues and warnings.**
- **Teach relaxation techniques for longer work periods or tests.**
- **Each day be sure students have one task they can complete successfully.**
- **Limit the amount of outside work.**
- **Whenever possible, break up a technique into manageable segments.**

Empowerment

Depending on the age of the student, ask him / her directly about what accommodations have worked in the past in other settings. This may enhance your training endeavors and success with the student.

Summary

You are not alone when you're working with students with special needs.

Some students may have multiple special needs (ie, AD/HD and physical impairment). Specialists, clinicians, and other experts can be sought for assistance. You may want to include special education teachers, diagnosticians, parents, social workers, representatives from community agencies, administrators, and other instructors. By working in concert and sharing ideas, you can provide a purposeful experience for each student with special needs.

CPR & First Aid

It does not necessarily require specialized medical training when training Martial Arts to students with special needs, however, as with most areas where people with disabilities and people in general are present, it would be best that you and your instructional staff and those parents that attend class often take and maintain CPR certifications.

Chronic Behavioral Difficulties

You may want to consider “positive sanction” and “negative sanction” methods as tasks to help with difficult behavioral problem situations.

ie; Positive – asking the student to demonstrate his/her best technique to the class and thanking the student for showing such a good skill.

Negative – Require 5 -10 knuckle push ups at the back of class or if a more serious sanction is required dismiss the student from the class or suspending for a period of time.

MANDT Training

This technique is used by many agencies that work with Students with Special Needs, and is taught to instructors of the Kido Kwan™ and agencies like Easter Seals®.

The Mandt System is a comprehensive, integrated approach to preventing, de-escalating, and if necessary, intervening when the behavior of an individual poses a threat of harm to themselves and/or others. The focus of The Mandt System is on building healthy relationships between all the stakeholders in human service settings in order to facilitate the development of an organizational culture that provides the emotional, psychological, and physical safety needed in order to teach new behaviors to replace the behaviors that are labeled “challenging”.

The Mandt System integrates knowledge about the neurological impact of childhood trauma with the principles of positive behavior support and provides a framework that empowers service providers to do their work in a way that minimizes the use of coercion in behavior change methodologies.

It is our intention that within this framework we create peace of mind, that

The Mandt System® can help you find appropriate solutions and then share these with everyone. This peace of mind comes from the fact that the instructional certification provided by The Mandt System® truly puts all people first by building healthy workplace relationships in which:

- Your service users will be safer
- Your staff will be safer
- Your work will meet or exceed your industry standards for safety

These statements are not simply marketing gimmicks but represent verifiable research based outcomes in programs like yours.

