

Confidence builder: Sydney Quinn, 6, takes classes with her dad in Chatham, N.J.



FAMILY

The Karate Generation

Roll over, soccer. Many kids are starting to prefer the discipline of the dojo to the chaos of the playing field.

BY SUSAN H. GREENBERG

VINCENT ALMEROOTH TRIED GYMNASTICS. He tried soccer, basketball and baseball, too. But the 11-year-old from Glenview, Ill., is dyslexic, which made it difficult for him to focus on the playing field. There was too much unanticipated movement and interaction with other kids, says his mother, Lisa Terranova. Then three years ago Vincent tried karate. It was an instant hit. His agility and self-confidence improved almost immediately, and his reading has progressed as well. Now the fifth grader is a blue belt. Karate has "given him a greater ability to focus and to struggle with things that are difficult," says Terranova. Vincent puts it more simply: "Karate makes me feel strong and good and happy."

Vincent is one of a growing number of kids who are finding success through karate. While martial-arts classes have been popular in America since "The Karate Kid" in 1984, lately they have become as ubiquitous on the extracurricular land-

scape as Little League and piano lessons. The number of martial-arts students under 12 has grown 15 percent a year for the past five years, says Katherine Thiry of the National Karate-do Federation. "Martial arts is everywhere—rec centers, churches, the inner city and suburbs," says Joe Corley, who founded a chain of karate schools in the Atlanta area. "It's time for the soccer moms to step aside for the karate moms."

For kids, the appeal lies in the sport's tangible rewards: different colored belts and respect on the playground. Those things are especially meaningful to children who, for whatever reason, are on the social fringe, unaccustomed to athletic achievement or who may be the targets of bullies. Karate—literally "empty hand" in Japanese—and its cousins judo, jujitsu and taekwon do develop strength and coordination while teaching children how to avoid conflict and defend themselves if attacked. Its individualistic bent is especially attractive to the children who are regularly picked last for the soccer team. "In soccer, unless chil-

dren have a modicum of talent, they're relegated to the sidelines," says Thiry. "[In karate], even the most uncoordinated, unfocused person can achieve."

Parents often steer their children toward the martial arts because of their own bad experiences on the schoolyard as kids—and they're particularly eager for their daughters to learn to protect themselves. Peter Quinn, 42, who takes classes at the Chatham Karate Academy in New Jersey with daughter Sydney, 6, and 4-year-old Drew, feels it is important to "instill confidence" in girls. "It shows them that you can do anything anyone else can do," he says.

Parents often notice a rise in their children's self-esteem when they start karate. And with good reason: a study by Bob Schleser, a sports psychologist at the Illinois Institute of Technology, recently found that children between 7 and 18 who took karate dramatically increased their "perceived competence" in areas ranging from social and cognitive skills to maternal acceptance. "Karate gives a general sense of confidence and personal control," says Schleser.

That's especially beneficial to children with learning or developmental disabilities. At the North Shore Martial Arts Academy, where Vincent Almeroth studies, nearly half of director Jeff Kohn's 110 students have special needs, ranging from cerebral palsy to autism. For 6-year-old James Fuller, who has spina bifida, karate has "really changed his life," says his mom, Joanne. Because of his disorder, James has to wear braces and shoes rather than go barefoot. But the experience has, among other things, helped him learn to cope with teasing.

Parents agree that the exact nature of the training is less important than the quality of the teacher. Because the martial arts are unregulated, anyone can open up a dojo, or studio. That's why parents need to shop around, says Rob Colasanti, vice president of the National Association of Professional Martial Artists. "You shouldn't be too concerned with the [martial arts] style but with how the instructor works with children," he says. Good karate instructors—though they might be strict—should also offer plenty of praise and encouragement, he says.

Indeed, Lisa Terranova is quick to credit Kohn for her son's achievement. Vincent has made so much academic progress that this fall he is being moved from a special school for learning-disabled kids to a mainstream Roman Catholic school. Pity the bully who makes the mistake of picking on him there. ■