



James Fuller, 9, of Skokie, goes through his karate routine. He wears shoes because his spina bifida requires leg braces.



Karate class is under way at the North Shore Dojo in Glenview. James Fuller, born with spina bifida, is front and center.

Not just for kicks

Kids with disabilities find karate helps mind and body

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STAFF INTERN

As modern medicine evolves in the 21st century, local special needs children are discovering the ancient art of karate as a prescription for success.

On a typical evening, Jeff Kohn's North Shore Dojo studio in Glenview resonates with grunts, groans, and pattering bare feet as children run through karate exercises, drills, and routines.

What is atypical is that many of these students suffer from debilitating disorders ranging from spina bifida to attention deficit disorder. In fact, 60 percent of Kohn's students have special needs.

Since the age of 5, when Kohn observed a blind child walk across a balance beam, he knew helping special needs students was his calling. Forty-five years later, he continues teaching karate to the most unlikely of children.

"It's all about reaching out to get kids to learn, enjoy and believe what they are doing," said Kohn. "To see a child that could barely walk coming in here and now he's a brown belt — it's really powerful work."

Karate, a martial arts discipline, employs kicking, striking and blocking with arms and legs, resulting in improved speed and explosiveness. Students work on improving their

concentration skills by focusing on the myriad techniques studied.

Kohn, a U.S. national karate coach, says the kata, a routine of 18 sequenced movements requiring students to use both sides of their body, accounts for the physical and emotional strides his students make.

"It's all muscle memory where they have to focus. They run through

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Karate instructor Jeff Kohn works with James Fuller during warm-up stretching exercises.



Joe Cyganowski/Plattester Press

Karate instructor Jeff Kohn at his dojo where he works with many special needs kids.

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a sequence of moves, they have to react, they start getting it and they use both sides of their brain," said Kohn.

During each class, Kohn leads the children through a seemingly never-ending series of intricate moves as he barks out the routine:

"Step forward!
"Left side low block!
"Step back right!
"Low block left!
"Step forward right!
"Punch!"

"For a professional clinician to see a kid with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) do these sequences, they think it's remarkable," Kohn said.

He says the students' achievements extend beyond the studio and into the classroom. After three to six months of karate, parents describe their children's improved study habits and renewed ability to concentrate in school.

For 9-year-old James Fuller of Skokic, born with spina bifida, karate has enabled him to compete with all children. In fact, Fuller placed third in the 2000 Junior Olympics karate competition in Orlando, Florida.

James's mother, Joanne Fuller, says karate, along with

her son's hard work, has changed his life.

"James's balance is so much better. He's running around, skipping and jumping hurdles," said Fuller.

Kohn admits karate exercises and occupational therapy, often prescribed for these children, offer similar benefits. But it's Kohn's approach, according to parents, that makes the difference.

During workouts, he challenges students by demanding they react. If not, he hits their leg to prompt a response. To maintain focus, he places students in front of a mirror and demands they concentrate on their eyes.

Ken Moses, an Evanston psychologist, says Kohn is intuitively the best teacher he has ever seen. He recalls watching in amazement as his son Kiel, born with cerebral palsy, regularly shed his limp upon beginning karate lessons under Kohn's tutelage.

"This is a person that has a natural talent," said Moses. "He has gotten Kiel to do things with his body that physical therapists and occupational therapists have not been able to do."

Other kids do things that they never thought they could. For Michael Early, 14,

born with neurological damage, improved balance is his achievement. At his first class, Kohn gave Early two canes for support while walking on a balance beam.

"Michael could never walk on a balance beam," said Deborah Early, Michael's mother. "I was impressed with how he could see where Michael was and assess what steps he needed."

"Jeff is incredibly intuitive about what each child needs," adds Joanne Fuller. "They all come with strengths and weaknesses and he knows how far to push them."

Recently, Kohn integrated school yard anti-bullying exercises into the workouts. Students stand with their backs to six-foot-tall dummies and Kohn teaches the students to turn around, face the dummy, and yell "I said stop it!"

Now, James Fuller defends himself.

"If somebody is being mean, I tell him to stop it. I used to be scared to do something," said James.

Likewise, Michael Early beams with pride as he recounts telling a bully at school to leave him alone. To date, Michael says, "He didn't say anything to me anymore."