

CAF Summer Camp 2014
Roundtable Forum on Teaching Children

We had 3 speakers start off the discussion: Steve Ericksen (Calgary, Alberta), Malory Graham (Seattle, Washington) and John Foster (City of Toronto, Ontario).

Malory, Pat and Dave told us about the children's Aikido classes at their Seattle dojo. They have about 25 kids; their adult program is much larger. There are programs for age 6 to 9, for age 9 to 12 and some specific programs for both groups. To facilitate interface with parents, her dojo sends out a monthly email newsletter.

A huge step forward occurred when the dojo implemented a monthly Automatic Payment Plan for both adults and kids. The USAF said that huge dojo growth can be directly tied to the automatic payment system; it reinforces the desired behaviour. If you are not on the automatic payment system, every month you have to decide whether or not you are coming to the dojo. Many parents really appreciate not having to deal with cheques or cash. The Seattle dojo uses its own bank rather than a service, and subscribers can unsubscribe at any time.

Malory stated that the USAF has no set curriculum for children's Aikido. She said that they recently changed their one hour classes to 45 minutes, since that works better for younger kids. In class, they do warm-ups, animal walks, techniques and Aikido games. Malory said that their kids love cleaning the dojo and their parents love to watch their kids do the cleaning work.

Malory wondered why Aikido has missed the opportunity to do anti-bullying training for children; she said that the MMA people have stepped in and filled this niche in the US. Aikido would have much more credibility in her view.

Steve stated that he has been teaching Aikido to kids since 1988. Their Calgary dojo has 240 kids! The classes are split: age 6 to 8 (younger kids on a case-by-case basis), age 9 to 12, age 12 to 14 and age 15 to 17. All but the last group practice twice a week. The age 15 - 17 group has one class a week and is expected to train with the adults. The kids pay either 4 months at a time or a full year. There is an option to pay monthly, but the program is so popular, they won't get in if they chose that option. Once the kids join the adult class, they go back to white belt. They will not have done Nikkyo, for example. Steve gets the kids to do laps, drills, pre-test and testing.

How do you get hundreds of kids to transition into the adult class? There was some discussion about the problem of losing teens. Steve said that children age 12 or older or who have brown belt are allowed in the adult class, if they are mature enough. He tells them, "It will take you 2 years to get black belt, but if you come to the adult class, you could test in 6 months." There is no CAF age minimum for black belt in Aikido. Hombu says the minimum for black belt is age 16.

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Steve has an instructor training program (ITP). Every class has one or more kids who have 1000 hours of training and can teach younger kids. These ITP kids get community service credit for helping teach. In a class of 30 kids, there may be 15 or 20 ITP kids.

Steve said they have spent tons of money on advertizing, but the only thing that works is to teach a class the kids like and the parents like. It takes 10 years to pass the word around and get the dojo to grow. They have "Bring a buddy to the dojo day" and "Bring a parent to the dojo day". At those times you have to do a special class to encourage those visitors to continue doing Aikido. Steve says they have 3 overnight and full day camps per year; these are more profitable than adult seminars and camps! The kids get fed, do tons of practice and get to scream and yell and have fun. They go home super-tired. Female and male students are separated for sleeping with same gender supervisors. Any parent who has concerns is invited to come and stay with the kids.

Several participants reported using Steve's curriculum for belt levels (Mark from Victoria Aikikai, Liz from Vancouver West Aikikai, and Natan from Vancouver Mind-Body Aikikai). Mark said that his dojo does overnight Aikido parties where the kids watch Kung-Fu Panda and do a bit of weapons. During their kids classes, Victoria dojo starts with drills after warm-ups (for example, the adults are pillars and kids have to go around them), then breaks the class into ranks for techniques and finishes with games for the last 10 minutes. Peter McLean said that forming kids into lines keeps them more engaged.

John agreed that lines work well. All the kids line up and have each of the kids on this side do the same thing. If they are in pairs in the big space, one or more of the pairs are goofing off. Anytime you have more than 12 kids, you can't watch them all. To keep an eye on them, aim for 10 kids per instructor/helper.

John teaches for the City of Toronto Parks and Recreation Department, which provides lots of training. John oversees 3 community centres and does not deal with the money at all. Kids come for a 3 month term and start from white belt. The ages range from 6 to 18. As they get older, they progress to the adult classes. John aims for a 10 to 1 ratio: 3 instructors and 3 volunteers for each class. Kids learn discipline, self-defense and have fun. John teaches when it is appropriate to use their martial arts. Is it okay to hit another kid who calls you names? No. John uses examples like that to explain to kids.

John said that program planning is really important in teaching kids. Each month has a theme and each week has a theme and each ½ hour has a theme. For example, a 17-year old is running a class, here is the program plan. Class has to start on time. Next they must lead a 15 minute warm-up including push-ups. Before the teen is allowed to lead the class, they shadow instructors who assign them a task to complete. This continues for a couple of weeks, when they are assigned to teach something. There are usually only 4 or 5 points for kids to

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teach. The student instructor has to submit a program plan before they can teach a class. If they don't come up with a plan, they don't teach. Children love structure. John ensures that they program a history aspect about Aikido and O'Sensei. For a one hour class, there has to be a lot of structure to enable kids to progress on their belt levels. John does not do games, but has some fun activities for kids.

John raised the issue of confidentiality of children's contact information. We need to be careful where we store information about kids' addresses, schools, who their friends are, etc. If a pedophile sees your easily accessible file in the dojo marked "Kids", they can get all the information they need to entrap a child, which would be very bad for the kids and your dojo. John said that parents have to tell him if someone else is picking up a child, otherwise you could have a problem. Also the child has to wait inside for the ride.

The City of Toronto has a policy that if a kid gets hurt, the instructor has to fill out an accident report; type of injury, who witnessed, who reported, and how followed up. All this information is written down and the parent gets an explanation about what happened. This documentation would really help if there was ever legal action by a parent. The City has incident reports too; these are filled out when there is an incident involving an angry parent or a misbehaving kid. The incident report requires the instructor to explain why they said what they did and expelled the kid. John agreed to share the incident and accident report templates and other information on volunteer training from the City.

Participants at the Forum who teach kids provided their email addresses to enable further exchanges of information and ideas. If anyone else wants to join this group list, please contact me or Vancouver West Aikikai.

Forum moderated and notes taken by:
Liz McKinlay
Deputy Dojo-Cho
Vancouver West Aikikai